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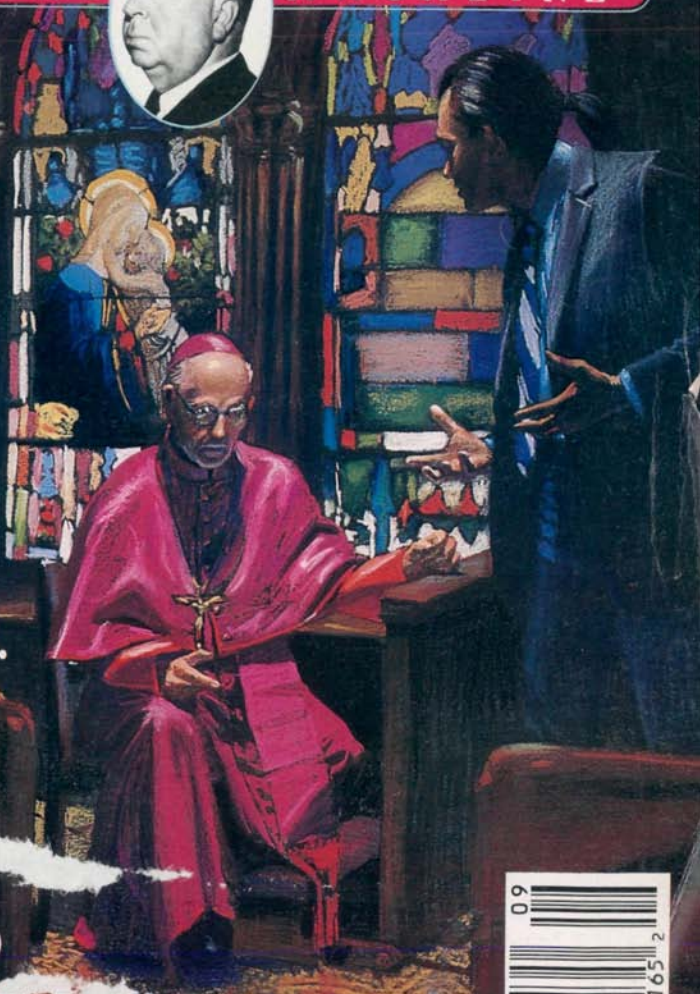


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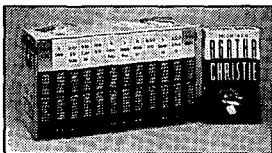
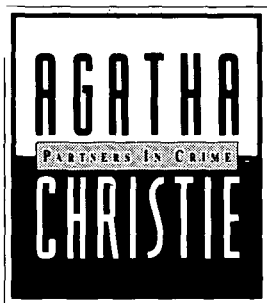
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

It has been sixteen years since a story by George C. Chesbro was last published in AHMM. From 1969 through 1975, however, this magazine published seventeen of his stories, several of them about the dwarf Mõngo, professor of criminology and private detective, who has in recent years been featured in Chesbro novels. The present story, "Priests," is about a different private detective, a defrocked clergyman who is summoned unexpectedly by the very cardinal responsible for his excommunication. A good story—and we're glad of Mr. Chesbro's return.

Three authors in this issue are completely new to our pages, and of course we welcome them, also. Tony Richards, a Londoner, has pub-

lished some thirty stories here and in the United Kingdom; the U.S. stories have appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. He is also the author of a supernatural thriller, *The Harvest Bride*, published by Tor in 1987. We think you will enjoy "The Writing on the Wall" as much as we did.

Racine Hiet, author of "The Haunted Critic," hails from British Columbia, Canada, and has written fiction for *A Matter of Crime* and Comment Films in Los Angeles.

"The Billboard Killings" is Mike Owens' first published story. He lives in the state of Washington and was a sales manager for a publishing house until a few years ago, when he decided to try writing instead.

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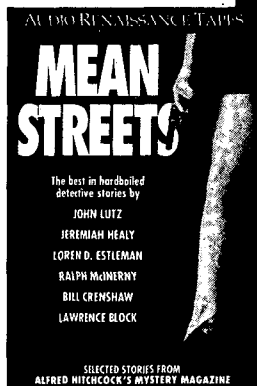
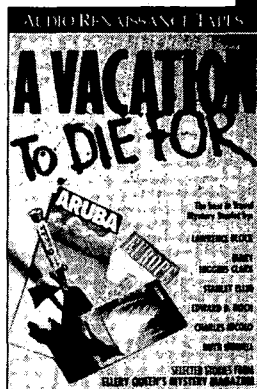
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FICTION



◆◆◆ Priests ◆◆◆

by George
C. Chesbro

Symbols that had once given him comfort and a sense of belonging to a community of infinite continuity now evoked in him opposite emotions, reminding him of his loss and his isolation from all the people, places, and things that had permeated his soul and defined his being until five years ago, when he had been banished from this world.

Flanked by the plastic statuary of the Stations of the Cross in their shadowy alcoves, feeling like a naked, vulnerable runner in a gauntlet set up to test his spirit, Brendan Furie, his footsteps muffled by thick maroon carpeting, strode quickly down the center aisle of the dimly lighted cathedral. He had not been inside a church in the five years since his excommunication, the amputation of his soul from the body of the church engineered by the figure in black who was kneeling, head bowed in prayer, at the railing before the white-draped altar at the front of the sanctuary.

Brendan had the distinct feeling that he was being watched, and he wondered if this might not be a kind of vestigial sense of the eyes of God, a psychological reaction to this return after a long absence to physical surroundings that had once meant everything to him

but now seemed only a distant memory from another life, perhaps one only dreamed.

He reached the front of the sanctuary, but the frail, kneeling figure remained still, and Brendan was not certain the other man was even aware of his presence. For a moment he felt the old, virtually instinctive, urge to genuflect before the altar, but he knew he no longer had either the obligation or the right, and so he simply sat down at the end of the first pew and waited for Henry Cardinal Farrell to finish his prayers.

Almost five minutes went by before the old man, without raising his head or unclasping his hands, said in a low voice, "Thank you for coming, father."

"I'm here because you asked me to come, eminence," Brendan replied evenly. He swallowed, added softly, "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't call me 'father.' Frankly, it sounds rather odd when you say it. You, of all people, know that I'm no longer a priest."

There was a prolonged silence, and Brendan began to wonder if the cardinal had heard him. But then the kneeling figure said, "Other people still call you that."

"No."

"You've become famous."

"Have I?"

"I've seen it in the newspapers. They call you 'the priest,' or sometimes just 'priest.'"

"It's not the same thing, eminence."

"No," the old man replied, and then shuddered slightly, as if he had suddenly experienced a chill. "And I'd prefer you not to address me as 'eminence.' It's been some time since I felt eminent. I appreciate your courtesy, but it isn't necessary."

"As you wish, sir."

"Brendan, are you . . . carrying a gun?"

It seemed a decidedly odd question in this stone house of worship, and Brendan stared at the old man's back for a few moments. But the kneeling figure remained inscrutable, old bones and flesh draped in black. Finally he replied, "No."

"I thought you might be. The stories . . ."

"Sometimes I carry a gun, but not often. In my business, a gun doesn't do much good. I've yet to meet the superstition, ignorance, obsession, or hatred that I could kill with a bullet."

Now the cardinal raised his head, unclasped his bony hands, straightened his back. He put both hands on the rail in front of him and struggled to rise. Brendan got to his feet and started forward to assist the other man, stopped when the

cardinal vigorously shook his head in protest. Brendan resumed his seat, waited. Finally the cardinal managed to stand. He turned, walked unsteadily to the pew across from Brendan, eased himself down. Brendan gazed into the eyes of the man sitting across the maroon-carpeted aisle, and was shocked by the stark gauntness of the features, the parchment-colored flesh that seemed almost translucent, the dark rings around the eyes. Henry Cardinal Farrell looked, Brendan thought, like a piece of fruit that had shriveled, or been cored.

The old man's lips drew back in a kind of bemused smile, and emotions Brendan could not decipher moved like moon shadows in the watery gray eyes. "Danger, the world, and good works seem to have served you well, priest. You look very well."

"You do not."

"I shall die . . . shortly."

"I'm sorry."

The frail Prince of the Church made a dismissive gesture with a trembling hand, and once again he smiled. "God really does work in mysterious ways, doesn't He?"

"I've heard it said, father."

"I suppose it could be said that in a certain way I created you."

"How so, father?"

"I created this 'priest' that you've become, this man of such fame—or notoriety, as some would have it—who is now a private investigator, of all things, specializing in religious and spiritual matters, a fierce defender of children and their rights. Before, you were just a . . . priest. I have heard it argued again and again that you are a far more effective avatar for Christ in your state of disgrace than you ever were before your . . . career change. The implications of this for the church are a subject of some heated debate among certain theologians. My name is almost never mentioned. I actually believe my role in it all has been forgotten."

Brendan said nothing. He felt oddly distanced, separated from this old enemy and the institution he represented by an unbreachable wall of betrayal, loss, pain, and death.

"You were never a good priest, Brendan," the cardinal continued in a voice that seemed to be growing stronger with a passion born of either anger or regret. "You were always a rebel, never at ease with the church. You were always questioning things you had no right to question."

"I questioned things you didn't want me to question, emi-

nence, but I always obeyed you, didn't I?" Brendan paused as he felt waves of his old resentment and anger rise in him, waiting for them to recede. When they were gone, he continued, "I went into retreat to do penance when you ordered me to, and I came out to do your errand when you ordered me to. It was not the church that made me ill at ease."

The cardinal stiffened. "Errand?"

"That's what I said."

"It was God's business."

"It was your business."

"The reason you were sent to retreat in the first place was to teach you that it wasn't your place to make such judgments."

Brendan suppressed a sigh. "Why did you ask me to come here, father?"

The old man looked away from Brendan, toward the altar and beyond at the huge, painted wood figure of Christ nailed to a cross. "I've told you I shall die shortly. I have my secular affairs in order, and now I am trying to do the same for my soul."

"What is it you want from me, father?" Brendan asked in a neutral tone.

"I want you to hear my confession."

Brendan could not believe he had heard the other man correctly; if he had, it could only

mean that his being asked to come here was the sad joke of a dying old man, or that the mind of that dying old man was deteriorating. Brendan said nothing.

"You would refuse the request of a man who is so close to death?"

"I don't understand the request."

"I don't ask you to understand it, only to grant it."

"I'm not exactly qualified to hear your confession, am I? Why should you wish to participate in a heretical act? Some of your more conservative colleagues might say you've committed heresy merely by making the request—that's assuming you're serious."

The old man opened his mouth and made a strange, rasping sound. It took Brendan a few moments to realize that the other man was laughing. "Since when have you concerned yourself with what the church did or did not consider heresy? I don't think you much cared even before they defrocked you."

"What concerns me is my business, father," Brendan replied evenly. "Forgive me for saying that you've played games with me before, and I can't help but wonder if this isn't just part of some other game."

The cardinal abruptly looked away; when he looked back at Brendan, his pale, watery eyes seemed unnaturally bright. "This is not a game, Brendan," he said forcefully.

"Your sins have nothing to do with me."

"You know that isn't so." He paused, leaned forward in the pew, added: "Some sins have a way of coming back to punish you in this life. Listen to me."

"I won't hear your confession."

The cardinal sighed, leaned back in the pew. "Why do you accuse me of having played games with you? You were asked to perform an exorcism. As a result of your miscalculations, the mother of the young girl in question committed a mortal sin by killing herself. Church authorities determined that the suicide of this woman was a direct result of your malfeasance—your lack of proper preparation and perhaps even your lack of faith and purpose; the sin, it was decided, was yours, not hers, and the punishment was your excommunication. That judgment may have been harsh, but it was influenced by your past attitudes and writings and your reputation and actions as a dissident priest. You were consistently involved with organizations, social and political causes that

the Holy See deemed inappropriate. You were warned more than once. Those are the facts. Do you dispute them?"

"I do not. Those are the facts. But the truth lies someplace else."

"Oh? Just what is the truth?"

"You sent me out to perform a rite for which you knew I wasn't prepared and in which you suspected I didn't believe."

"You don't believe in demonic possession?"

"I believe in obsession founded on greed, lust, hatred, or a dozen other human evils. But it's hard enough to get people to take responsibility for their actions without providing them with the potential excuse that the devil made them do it."

"It's not like you to be flippant or disrespectful of ideas other people take very seriously, Brendan."

"I'm telling you the truth you claimed to want to hear. If you think I'm being flippant, you still don't understand me and you can never understand what happened. Lisa Vanderklaven wasn't possessed by demons; her erratic behavior was, under the circumstances, rational and healthy. She had a very good reason for defying her father and continually running away from home, namely that she was being persistently and brutally abused by the same man

who had made her mother his mistress and who was her father's close business associate. When Lisa told her father about the abuse, he refused to believe her. Henry Vanderklaven preferred to believe that his daughter was possessed by demons, for to accept that she was being molested by Werner Pale would have interfered with his business interests and cast considerable doubt on his ability to judge character. Lisa Vanderklaven needed protection, not exorcism.

"In my initial interview with Lisa, she broke down; she couldn't believe that her father could actually believe she was possessed. That was when she told me that Pale had not only been molesting her, but had been involved in a sexual relationship with her mother for some time; Pale had bragged about it to her. At the time, I didn't feel I had any choice but to talk with Olga Vanderklaven, not only to try to confirm Lisa's story but to offer the mother my help, if she wanted it. *That* was my mistake. Faced with the fact that Lisa and I knew about her lover, and that the lover was molesting her daughter, she committed suicide.

"If anybody in that family could have been described as possessed, it was Lisa's father,

and he'd created his own hell out of a deadly combination of greed and self-righteousness. Vanderklaven's greed was what led him to employ a man like Werner Pale in the first place. Vanderklaven was an arms dealer, as you well know. What you might not have known was that Werner Pale was a murderous soldier of fortune whom Vanderklaven employed to train *provocateurs*. Those *provocateurs* were kept busy whipping up brush wars in various parts of the world in order to keep up the volume of sales of the arms Vanderklaven manufactured. He saw nothing wrong with what he did; he was an impossibly self-righteous man who could not see the evil around him that he'd created. He was a zealous Catholic with powerful friends in Rome, a church benefactor who gave millions to various church causes. He was so assured of his reservations in heaven that he could destroy his family and be blissfully unaware of the cause—the evil he had brought home with him, the man he considered a friend as well as a business associate. When Lisa told him that his friend was raping her, Vanderklaven demanded that she see a psychiatrist; when she ran away, he sent Werner Pale to find her and bring her back. When she ran

away again he went to his golf buddy—you, eminence—and asked you to arrange for an exorcism to free his daughter from her demons. Demonic possession was the only explanation he could think of for her behavior.

"I believe, eminence, that when you heard the story you knew it would not withstand the scrutiny and investigation Rome requires before declaring officially that someone is demonically possessed, and that it was highly unlikely you would be able to get a trained exorcist to intervene in the affairs of this very troubled family. But you were afraid to offend Henry Vanderklaven by telling him the truth; you were afraid he might tighten his purse strings to the detriment of the church's interest, perhaps even afraid he might complain to his friends in the Vatican about your lack of sensitivity. And so you looked around for another solution to the problem he'd handed you, and I was it. You would send this young priest you were trying to break to go through the motions of performing an exorcism; once again you would force me to submit to your will while at the same time making Vanderklaven happy. I failed, father, yes, and because of my failure as a human being to

fully perceive and deal with Olga Vanderklaven's torment, she committed suicide as a direct result of my inquiries. Well, Rome was not about to declare that the soul of the wife of this important lay pillar of the church would burn in hell; in their view, and perhaps yours, it was preferable to consign my soul to burn in hell, and I was subsequently excommunicated. I didn't disagree with their action then, and I don't now. I was responsible for the woman's death because I should have ignored your machinations, scrapped the whole idea of an exorcism, and referred the case to social workers. Olga Vanderklaven died because of my failure as a priest, eminence, but she also died because you sent someone you knew to be spiritually unequipped for the task of performing a rite that wasn't even called for to meddle in an incredibly raw emotional situation. *That*, eminence, is the truth."

Brendan waited, anticipating defense or denial. Instead, the cardinal simply said, "You are right, priest. That is the truth."

"If you understand that, it seems to me that you have confessed all you need to."

The old man slowly turned to face Brendan, and his pale eyes

went wide. "Understand this, Brendan," he said in a trembling voice. "Satan himself was there. It was Satan himself you were battling against."

Brendan studied the other man's face, saw real fear there—as well as something else he could not read. "I assume you're speaking metaphorically, father." He paused, frowned when the cardinal responded by shaking his head. "Werner Pale?"

Now the cardinal nodded. Brendan ran his hands back through his black shoulder-length hair, looked down at the floor as he resisted the impulse to say something flippant or sarcastic that he knew he would regret. Finally he looked up, said, "No, father. Pale was a murderous psychotic and a totally useless human being, not Satan. Believing that is just your way of avoiding taking personal responsibility for what happened. That's what Henry Vanderklaven did, and it's what killed his wife."

The cardinal's eyes went even wider, and his hands began to shake along with his voice. "But what if I'm right, Brendan? What if it was Satan?"

"What you believe is none of my business, eminence," Brendan replied evenly. "Believe

what makes you at peace, but don't then ask me to help resolve the conflicts that remain.

The old man took a deep breath, slowly exhaled. His trembling eased, and he sank back wearily in the pew. "I would very much like to know what happened afterward," he said in a voice so low Brendan could barely make out the words.

"Didn't Vanderklaven tell you?"

The old man sighed, producing an odd rattling sound in his lungs. "Henry Vanderklaven put a bullet in his brain soon after returning here from Europe, which was about three months after the events we have been discussing transpired. I believe it was because of something you said or did to him."

Brendan searched inside himself for some feeling of pity for Henry Vanderklaven, a man who, according to his belief system, had sentenced himself to eternal damnation. He felt nothing. He believed the man had done nothing to himself except end his life. He found he no longer believed in hells or heavens save for those created by living human consciousness and deeds, and perhaps never had. His faith had always been about living each

day as a human trying to live up to the example set by Christ, not eternal rewards or punishments. What he did believe, what he knew, was that Henry Vanderklaven had created a hell for others that still tormented them, and he was glad the man was no longer alive.

"Brendan?" the cardinal continued softly. "What happened?"

"After Lisa ran away for the second time and came to the children's shelter, I promised her she would be protected from any kind of demons—human or otherwise—until I had investigated to try to determine the truth," Brendan said in an even tone that belied the turmoil once again building inside him. "I failed her. Not only did her mother commit suicide as a result of my bungling questions, but Werner Pale—acting on the father's orders—kidnapped her a second time while I was otherwise occupied trying to defend myself against excommunication. Then father, daughter, and Werner Pale left for Europe. As far as law enforcement and social welfare agencies here were concerned, the matter was out of their jurisdiction. But it wasn't a situation I could live with. I'd promised Lisa she wouldn't be harmed. I searched for them, and I found them. The details

aren't important. What matters is that I finally found a way to make Henry Vanderklaven face up to the fact that the friend he relied on to stir up his business of death had cuckolded him and raped his daughter repeatedly. He saw, finally, how his own greed had blinded him, destroyed his wife, and caused his daughter to hate him. I didn't know he'd killed himself. For all his outward zealotry, he apparently didn't believe in forgiveness, not even for himself, and he certainly must not have believed in redemption."

"And where . . . is the girl now?"

"In New York. She's happily married, with a child. She works for a private children's social service agency."

Now the old man again slowly turned to look at Brendan, studied his face for some time. Finally he said, "Ah, yes. It's the same agency, I presume, for which you have done such good work, the one operated by the former nun with whom you are rumored to have a . . . relationship?"

"I don't think that's really a part of this story, eminence, is it? The point is that Lisa is safe now, with her own life to lead. She still has nightmares, but those will pass with time."

The cardinal nodded slightly.

"And . . . Werner Pale?"

"He's dead. I killed him."

Brendan watched the other man react with what could have been surprise, but also with something else Brendan could not quite determine. "You, priest, killed this professional soldier?"

"He was trying to kill me. We fought, and I was lucky. He'd planned to burn me to death, but he was the one who fell into the fire."

Once again the old cardinal, apparently lost in his own thoughts, was silent for some time. At last, he said, "I've heard it said that you've killed a number of men since you left us. Can you have changed so much, priest?"

"How much I have changed is not for me to say, eminence. I've harmed no one who was not trying to harm me, or sometimes a child. I've told you what you wanted to know. Are you satisfied?"

"Would you care to hear what has happened to me over the past five years?"

"If you feel the need to tell me, I will listen."

"God has turned his face from me, Brendan. I wronged you, and I've been punished. While it's true that the decision to excommunicate you came from Rome, the same people ultimately blamed me, for they

knew the truth you spoke of. I often feel as if I have been excommunicated along with you. There has been no peace for me during the past five years."

"It sound to me as if you've been busy punishing yourself, eminence. You made a mistake, and God will forgive you. Where is your faith?"

The cardinal shook his head impatiently, with renewed vigor. "It was more than just a mistake. It's true that I never believed the girl was possessed, and yet I sent you to perform a sacred ritual simply to mollify her father. That is blasphemy, sacrilege. I need not only God's forgiveness, but yours, Brendan."

"You have it."

"Hear my confession."

"I believe I already have."

"In the confessional. Please."

"I don't think so, eminence. This is the second time you have asked me to perform a sacred rite under inappropriate circumstances. The—"

"Precisely!"

"—first time neither of us believed in what we were doing, and death and my excommunication were the results; now that I have been excommunicated, church authorities would not recognize the sanctity of any confession you made to me. I don't understand what it is you really want, but I do know

that it can't be the sacrament of confession."

The old cardinal slowly rose to his feet, turned to face Brendan, drew himself up very straight. Suddenly his eyes were very bright. "If you do not understand, priest, then you have not been listening to my words carefully, as I asked you to. I need to confess to you so that I can hear you say the Hail Marys."

Suddenly Brendan felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck, and he resisted the impulse to make any sudden movement. "As you wish, eminence," he replied in an even tone, bowing his head slightly.

"The confessor will come to you," the cardinal said in the same strong voice, and then turned away.

Brendan forced himself to remain still, to breathe evenly, as he watched the old man hobble across the sanctuary and disappear through a door to the right of the altar. He waited a few seconds, then rose and walked toward the ornately carved wood confessional stalls to his left. He hesitated just a moment before entering the priest's section of the confessional and sitting down.

Sins have a way of coming back to punish you in this life. Listen to me.

Almost five minutes passed,

and then Brendan heard the door in the section on the other side of the wood screen open. Brendan glanced through the screen and watched as a stooped figure wearing a white robe with a cowl entered.

Even without the cardinal's cryptic request to hear him speak Hail Marys, which was a reversal of the rite and all wrong, he would have sensed danger now, for this robed and hooded figure wore the white sash, the alb, around his neck, and that was wrong; a priest wore the alb to receive confession, not to enter the box as a penitent.

His earlier sensation of being watched had not been a fantasy, Brendan thought, but the eyes watching him had definitely not been those of God.

... Are you carrying a gun?

Brendan stood and hurled himself at the screen, hitting the wood with his right shoulder and placing his left forearm across his face to protect his eyes from splinters. He hurtled through the fragile lattice-work, landing against the robed figure, and they both fell to the floor of the stall. Brendan used his left hand to grab the wrist of the man's right hand, which had emerged from the robe holding a .22 caliber pistol, while he drove his right fist into the man's midsection.

The cowl slipped back, revealing a face that was a nightmare mass of milk-colored, puckered scar tissue and lines of pink scars that could only have been the results of a series of failed operations. Werner Pale writhed beneath Brendan with the strength born of bottomless hatred and rage, swung at his head with the steel hook that had been used to replace his left hand. Brendan ducked under the blow but felt the sharp tip against his back as the steel began to dig its way through his leather jacket toward his flesh. He reached out with his free hand, found a shard of wood from the shattered screen, wrapped his fingers around it. As the steel tip sliced through his jacket and touched skin, he raised the stake in the air, then drove the tip down into Werner Pale's throat.

Blood spurted from the pierced jugular. The scarred O of the man's mouth opened in a silent scream, but almost immediately the one seeing eye began to glaze over. The body beneath Brendan twitched violently for a few moments, then was still.

Brendan rose from the corpse, threw open the door to the confessional and, wiping blood from his face, ran through a labyrinth of narrow stone and wood corridors toward the cardinal's private chambers.

He found the old man, looking even paler and with pain clearly evident in the watery eyes, sitting at the desk in his study, seemingly holding himself upright with his palms on the polished oak surface before him.

"Brendan," Henry Cardinal Farrell breathed as Brendan came through the door, stopped. "Thank God. My prayers have been answered." He paused and squinted, as if he was having trouble seeing. "You're hurt . . . ?"

"The blood is Werner Pale's, eminence, not mine."

"Thank God."

"Thank you for your warning. It saved my life."

"I couldn't warn you outright, priest. He was listening."

"I understand," Brendan said and again started forward. He stopped a few feet from the desk when the cardinal raised one trembling hand with the palm outward, as if to push him back.

"He came to me . . . to kill me, of course, since I was responsible for sending you into his life. He wanted to know where to find you and the girl, and he said that he would kill me quickly if I told him. There is nothing he could have done to make me tell him, Brendan. Believe me."

"I do, eminence. You don't have to explain."

"But I want to," the old man said in a voice that was growing progressively weaker.

"I believe he spent most of the past five years in hospitals, or he would have known how famous you've become. He would have had no trouble finding you, and you would have had no warning. He might also have traced the girl, Lisa. I decided to gamble for your life and the girl's; you had defeated him once before, and perhaps you could do it again. I sensed that he was afraid of you. But I also sensed that he badly wanted to make you suffer, and that shooting you down from some rooftop would not be satisfying for him. I acted well, Brendan. I got down on my knees before him and begged him for my life. I told him I would bring you to him and extract the information he wanted, if only he would spare my life. I also told him I would help trap you in a closed space where you would be at his mercy. He was very pleased with the idea of killing you in the confessional booth, positively delighted when I suggested that he could pretend to be me. He said he was going to shoot you in the belly or kneecaps first, and then carve you up. He couldn't stop laughing

when I showed him the robe and sash he could wear. He loved the idea of dressing up like a priest to kill you." The old man paused, and the broad smile that suddenly appeared on his face seemed to belong to a much younger and less troubled man. "That's when I knew we had a chance, priest, for you, of all people, would find it rather odd that I, of all people, would ask you to join me in an act of heresy."

Then the cardinal coughed blood and pitched forward on the desk. Brendan rushed forward, lifted the old man by the shoulders, saw the blood, and the handle of the stiletto that was protruding from the other man's stomach. He also saw

that it was too late.

"Pray for me, priest. God listens to you. Pray for me. Help my soul find its way to heaven."

"I will."

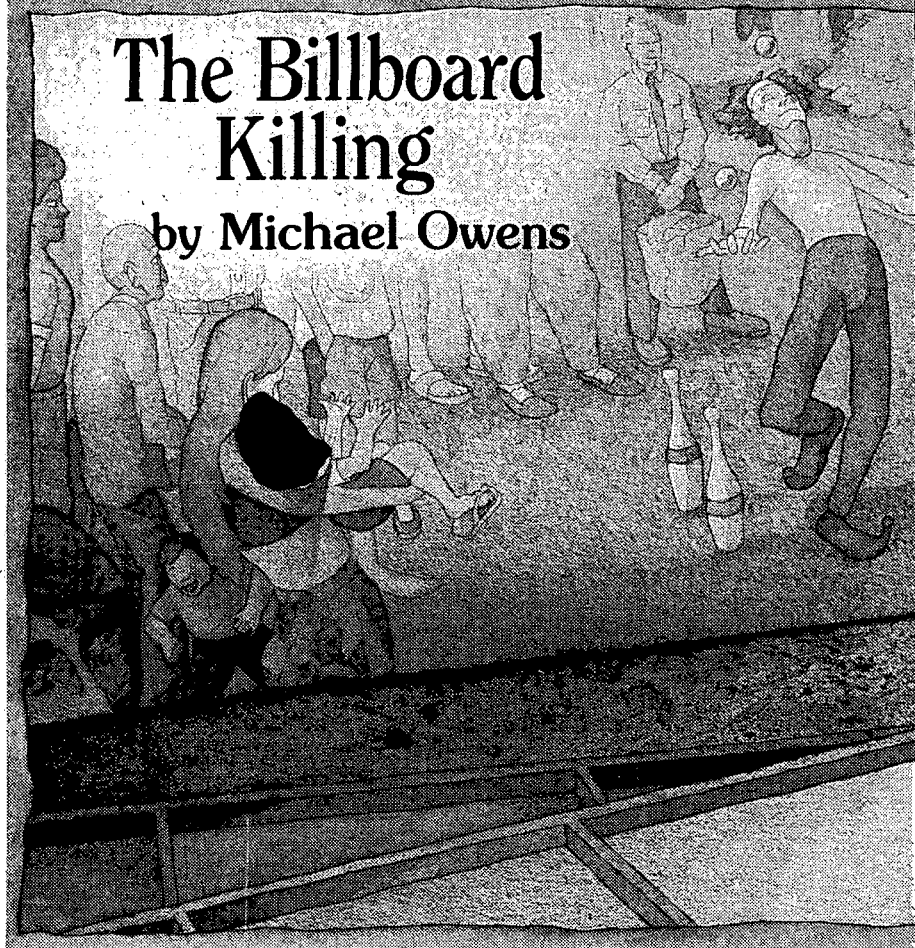
"Do you . . . understand what I . . . mean?"

"Yes. I will."

And then the old man was gone. Brendan walked to the wardrobe in a corner of the office, removed a robe, and put it on. He removed the crucifix from the cardinal's neck, put it around his own. Then he knelt beside the old man's body and began performing the last rites, his last rite. For the first time in five years he prayed in the old way, as if it mattered.

The Billboard Killing

by Michael Owens



“His name’s Luboff. Barney Luboff. Says someone murdered his billboard.”

I held the phone to my ear. I couldn’t think of an intelligent response.

“You there?”

“Yeah. Guy’s got a dead billboard?”

“That’s what he said. Look into it.” He gave me an address in Whitefork and hung up.

Luboff was a little brown man with a shock of white hair



and a big grin. I liked him right off. He was a talker, and on our way from his house to the studio, he told me his age, birthplace, marital status, race, and creed. He also told me that he was a commercial artist with a desire to do bigger stuff.

"Commercial art must pay well," I said, stopping in the middle of the bridge that spanned the deep ravine separating his house from his studio. I looked back at the large house.

"It pays," he said. "But not

that well." He leaned carelessly on the wobbly railing. "I inherited the place."

We walked toward the clump of firs that hid the studio. A hawk rose into the air, outlined against white clouds.

The studio was a loghouse. Huge cedar logs supported rough-sided walls. It was massive and seemed to grow out of the damp moss-bound earth.

"That's mine," Barney said. "Built it from the trees I took to make the clearing."

A huge room heated by a central fire gave enormous space in which to work. A skylight let in natural light, as did the far wall, which was almost entirely of glass. Thick sheaves of Barney's works leaned against the wall. When he said "bigger," he meant it. These things were huge. Boxes were stacked here and there, containing, I assumed, the clutter of his work.

Against one wall stood a thick stack of Barney's huge works. Several had been laid face down to expose the mutilated billboard.

I felt I'd seen it before. I stepped closer. "This didn't just happen," I said.

"No. I just found it this morning."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

"Why were you looking

through these this morning?"

"Oh. I had a sale . . . sort of a sale. Some gallery wanted to feature local artists for a day. They were going to pay me to display it."

He shook his head at the ruined board. "Anyhow, a friend told me about Santucci, how he works cases police don't want." He gestured at the work: "Police don't want this. I got a case number for the insurance, but they aren't going to do much else. They figure vandals. Kids."

"When's the last time you looked at it?"

He thought. "About ten days ago. The local paper wanted a picture."

"They took a picture of this?" I couldn't believe my luck.

"Well . . . no. They couldn't make it fit. We used something smaller, and the caption referred to this piece."

I touched the edge of one of the holes that had been cut through the canvas. Two of the faces were gone from the right side of the painting and one from the left. "What was here?" I asked. "In these holes?"

"I don't really remember. Faces." He poked the two squares on the right. "Man's face. Woman's face." He pointed to the third spot, hesitated, then: "Boy's face."

I stepped back and took in

the central figure, a juggler, and I remembered. "Bumper-shoot," I said, referring to a local outdoor entertainment.

"That's right."

I remembered standing in the hot sun on the green grass watching the billboard artist at work. "I saw you working on this."

I turned to look at the door through which we'd come. "Do you keep the door locked?"

"No. I'm pretty isolated here."

"Not any more."

"No," he said, looking at the billboard, "not any more."

"How do you get the faces?"

I asked. "Do you ask people to pose?" I remembered the juggler, lifesize, against its own miniature, a Polaroid photo. I answered my own question: "A photograph. Do you keep the photos?"

"No. I throw them away. Doesn't seem quite right to keep them." He thought for a minute. "In a file, I mean. Like a morgue."

It wasn't my day for easy clues. I turned back to the painting. The board was full of people. A girl wore a Mickey Mouse T-shirt. A bearded young man had silver earrings that reflected pinpoints of radiance from painted sunlight. There were rings, buckles, necklaces.

"You've put a lot of work into the peripheral stuff," I said. I touched one of the earrings. "The jewelry."

"Social shorthand," said Barney. "Labels that tell others what we think or do."

"Bumper stickers."

He nodded. "Vanity plates. Buttons. T-shirts. 'Esprit.'"

We contemplated the board with its three blanks. "Patagonia," I said.

I left Barney to his work and took a look outside. Around the foundation was a layer of bark some four feet out from the walls. The path from the bridge to the door was of raised, packed earth that filled log borders leading up from the bridge. A recent rain had smoothed it so that the only clear tracks were mine and Barney's, and those were faint on that hard surface.

The edge of the path was thick with leaves, alder and vine maple. Starting on the left-hand side, I uncovered a two-foot square, leaf by leaf. Nothing.

I stood to stretch my knees out. The drizzle had started, growing like silver moss on my wool shirt.

I squatted down on the right side of the path and began patiently to lift leaves again. The first dozen or so brought me to

a heel print. I uncovered the rest of it. Clear as a bell. The right foot. I estimated a stride length and started lifting leaves again. The left foot. Hiking boots. I measured their length, using my pen as a ruler. Twelve inches. I measured the distance between them. Two feet.

I sat on the log that bordered the path. Someone had come across the bridge and avoided the path, thinking to leave no prints in the leaves.

I looked at the prints. I'd read about this. This was the first time I'd tried it. I amazed myself.

Barney approached. "I was watching from the window," he said. He stood in front of me looking down at the patch of bare earth. "Something?" he asked. He wore running shoes. Nikes. Little ones.

I pointed at the left print. "Too large for you," I said. "Too small for me."

"Yeah." He lifted one foot to fit it to the print. I stopped him.

"Well, he said, watching me replace the leaves. "Now what?"

"I ask around," I said. I was a little ruffled by his matter-of-fact acceptance of my discovery. How many people knew that trick, for god's sake?

On my way back to the car, now that I was looking for it,

was another print. Pointed the same direction I was going.

I spent the next two days in futile "asking around," and then on the morning of the third day I opened the morning paper and found Barney's name on the front page. "Local Artist in Fatal Accident," said the headline. Barney had fallen from his rickety bridge.

The phone rang.

"You see the paper?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's possible. The surface was slick and the railing about to give way." I hesitated. "It could be a coincidence." Frank hated the word. Two events in the same area were contiguous, not coincidental.

"Here's another coincidence for you," he said, leaning hard on the offending word. "Missing woman. Dead billboard, dead artist. All in Whitefork."

I said nothing. Frank always managed to call before coffee. And he hadn't asked about the billboard.

"What about the billboard?"

I told him.

"How much of it was taken out?"

I told him.

"A couple of faces. Maybe three." He was thinking out loud. "Maybe one."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone wants one face gone. Take out three or four: which one are we looking for?" Then, in an abrupt change of topic, he gave me an address. "That's where the Warrens live. John and Leslie. As long as you're there, check it. Interview some folks. Earn your money." He hung up.

John Warren could wait awhile. I went back to the paper and tried to mourn for Barney.

The Warren house sat well back from the road. Surrounded by trees, it stood as an island in an area swamped by development fever.

I knocked.

A middle-aged man opened the door. "Yes?" He was wary, cold-eyed; not about to waste a limited store of friendliness.

"Mr. Warren?"

He nodded.

"You talked to Frank Santucci?"

"Ah, yes." He opened the door wider and motioned me in. We walked into a sunken living room. We sat in sunken chairs.

"You told Frank your wife is missing," I said.

"Yes."

"How long?"

He thought, mentally counting: "Ten days."

"You've notified the police?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And they're not looking too hard. This isn't the first time."

"Which time is it?"

"Twice before," he said. "The first was for a month. She left a note about space and self and room to breathe. The second time was for three months."

"Did she leave a note?"

"No."

"Did she leave a note this time?"

"No."

I felt like a dentist. I pulled another tooth: "When did you last see her?"

He didn't quite smirk. "Ten days ago."

"Mr. Warren, what did she do when she left? Did she give you an airy wave? A casual 'ta-ta,' a meaningful gesture?"

Warren blinked and decided to be more forthcoming. "She went for a run. A pair of shorts is missing. And her wallet. That's all. I wasn't here."

"Ten days in a pair of shorts is a long time, Mr. Warren."

"She had the Visa."

"If she'd used it, the police could find her."

"Oh."

We sat, contemplating the implication. "Well," I said, breaking the silence. "What does she do outside the house?" I tried not to emphasize my use of the present tense.

"She's on the school board."

"Is she a teacher?"

"No."

"Anyone she might have confided in?"

"I doubt it." He shifted in his chair and thought for a moment. "Leslie's an ambitious woman. She likes power. She'd be very unlikely to confide in anyone. Even me. It might give us power over her when she wanted power over us." He thought a bit more. "You might talk to Bill Runson."

"Who's he?"

"President of the school board. They've just received a grant. He assigned Leslie to coordinate its use."

I wrote his name in my notebook. "Anyone else? How about neighbors?"

"Kit Bishop."

"Bishop?" I'd heard the name. "Of the Bishop Foundation?"

He nodded. "She lives about a quarter mile from here. Leslie loves that. The idea of such a person in the same neighborhood."

"Your wife knew her?"

"Well, she said something about discussing the foundation with her. The foundation awarded the grant. There was a vacancy on the board. Leslie was planning to go for it. I don't know that she actually did."

"Did she qualify for a seat?"

"My wife qualified for very little, Mr. Anderson. Luckily, money is often considered a qualification."

"Mrs. Warren had money?"

"Leslie had my money. Devoid of ability and talent, she had my money to buy power."

"She bought a seat on the school board?"

He shrugged.

"What could she have offered Mrs. Bishop?"

He laughed. "Not a thing. We're dirt farmers compared to Mrs. Bishop. I doubt that Leslie seriously entertained the idea beyond the wishful stage."

Mrs. Bishop was a woman who'd widowed well. The house was enormous. If Warren still had a patch of woods, Mrs. Bishop had a whole forest. I rang the bell.

The door opened immediately. The Hulk stood there. Grinning, friendly—big enough to make me feel suddenly diminished.

The boy said nothing. Just stood and grinned. He wore a necklace, and I wasn't about to comment on it. Nor was I about to comment on the earring.

"Is Mrs. Bishop in?" I asked.

"I'm Mrs. Bishop." She stepped into view from behind the boy. She was lean, attrac-

tive. Expensive sweep of fabrics from shoulder to floor. I wondered how long she'd been there behind her human barrier, head cocked, perhaps, to detect potential menace in the voice at the door.

"Mrs. Bishop, I'm Nick Anderson." I waved my card at her. She stepped closer to take it, and I could see that her appearance was more art than reality. The hand that held the card was large and rough-looking. The other hand stayed in the pocket of her skirt. She looked hard, tooled. I remembered her given name was Ida Mae. "Kit," then for "Kitten"? Cute, cuddly. Nicknames die hard. She read the card.

"What does Santucci Investigations want with me?" she asked, handing it back. She was tall enough to look me directly in the eye. The Hulk still put us both in the shade.

"We're looking for someone who might be able to tell us about Leslie Warren. She seems to be missing." She hadn't asked me in. I still stood on the porch talking around the massive boy who patiently held the door.

"Leslie . . . oh, yes. That pushy creature on the school board."

"Mrs. Bishop," I said. "May I come in?"

She shrugged and turned her

back to walk down a hallway that would have done credit to the Mountain King. The Hulk didn't stop me, so I followed. She walked like a model. A former model. An exaggerated swing to the shoulders. Hips slung slightly forward. Thirty years ago, yes. Now, it looked arrogant. The arrogance of those who can be whatever they want because they can buy self perception.

She led me to a room that by virtue of books and prints had to be known as The Library. A large painting of a florid individual with plump, greedy lips held the place of honor over the huge fireplace. A massive poker hung from iron hooks over the opening. Probably used, in the old days, to test whether the roast steer was done.

The hooks had been screwed into a granite boulder from which the fireplace had been hollowed. It extended from floor to ceiling. The room seemed made of impregnable materials; even the books formed a dense covering on the walls.

Two wing chairs faced each other in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Bishop sat in one and motioned me to its companion. I sat and leaned back. My peripheral vision was immediately blocked by the wings. All

I could see was Mrs. Bishop. She sat waiting for me to begin. Her hands were tucked out of sight, and she looked somehow smaller, more delicate. I leaned forward.

"Mr. Warren seemed to feel you might have recently spoken to his wife."

"I can't think why."

"He said something about an empty seat on the Foundation board?"

She smiled. She pitied me. Under other circumstances she would have called me "dear boy" or "darlin'," using the faint twang of one born out in the prairie states somewhere. I'd been born there. Mrs. Bishop had come a long way from the hard dirt and tall grass of home.

"It takes," she said, "a bit more than a stint on the school board to qualify one for The Bishop."

"Mrs. Warren hadn't talked to you about the seat?"

"No." End of that conversation. "You're a big man, Mr. Anderson... Nick. May I call you Nick?"

I shrugged.

"My husband was a big man." She cocked her head at the painting. I pretended interest and wondered how the artist managed to get away with those lips. I wondered if the artist had been paid.

Mrs. Bishop got up. "Is that it, Mr. Anderson?" I'd been compared; I wasn't quite big enough.

"I suppose so," I said, also getting up. Perhaps I'd been too absorbed in the painting, too uninterested in Kit. "Thanks for seeing me."

"Not at all." She turned at the door: "Jeremy will show you out."

I stepped into the hall. I could see Jeremy waiting in happy anticipation of my imminent departure.

"Is Jeremy the butler?" I asked.

"He's my son, Mr. Anderson." She gave me a challenging look as though daring me to comment upon her "burden." I didn't, but her remark about size seemed to take on a wistful quality. In this house, there was a surfeit of the gross. Perhaps Mrs. Butler longed for some delicacy.

At the door I spoke to the boy. "Jeremy?"

He nodded violently: "Jeremy!"

I couldn't think of anything more to say.

He put out one huge hand. I took it, wincing prematurely at the anticipated strength that didn't come. The sun gleamed from a silver bracelet on the massive wrist.

I thought about Jeremy on

the drive back. What purpose did his jewelry serve? Did the shapes allow his hidden mind to communicate; a note in a bottle needing only to be read? Or was it the color; the silver itself? The color of a Puget winter full of thick rain. The color of the painted shapes in Luboff's billboard.

Runson was surprised: "Leslie missing? No, I wouldn't have any idea. Hell, she was working on a seventy-five thousand dollar grant for us." He was quiet for a minute. I was pretty sure he was mulling his options for replacing Leslie.

"She said nothing about where she might go? Some task in relation to the grant?"

"No. She had things pretty well worked out. She'd lined up a gallery and museum visit."

"Gallery?"

"Art gallery." Runson saw I didn't get it. "You know; for the grant. An arts grant."

"Oh." Maybe Frank was right. Contiguity. "Tell me about the gallery."

"They'd agreed to concentrate on local artists on the day the classes would be in. Part of the grant was disbursed to them. They'd use it to pay the artists for their time."

"What's the name of the gallery?"

"Cole's."

Cole Forman used his hands a lot when he talked. Languid movements, full of world-weariness.

"Sure. Luboff was going to display here. Shame, really. Fine artist cut off in his prime like that."

I looked around the gallery. I didn't see any Luboffs hanging on the walls.

Forman pretended not to see the direction of my glance. "Luboff was a little too, ah, massive. Yes. Too monumental for us to handle. A work like that, taking the space of fifty smaller pieces. We'd have to price it out of the market to make it pay. But that doesn't mean I didn't respect his work."

The drive back to Whitefork took me past the entrance to Barney's place. I stopped, reversed, and drove out to the house. I got out of the car and walked to the bridge.

A print was there, caught in the soft junk where the bridge surface abutted the earth. Heading toward the loghouse this time. A Nike print was a little to the left of that. If I really knew how to read sign, I'd see two sets of tracks go to the middle of the bridge, to the broken rail and one set coming back. Perhaps one pair moved slightly to the rear of the other,

heels just barely raised, toes quietly depressing the rotting surface of the bridge's spongy wood. Hands outstretched in the dark, reaching for a target surmounted by a shock of white hair.

Under cloudless skies, with the white mountains clearly defined in the distance, the prints were in shadow under the slanting sun. I looked behind me. No dark figure parted the barbed vines of the blackberry to stare out at me. No thing crept enigmatically across the damp meadow that glittered in the sun.

That night I dreamed of feet. Feet inside hiking boots, warm and fetid. John Warren's feet were slightly damp with tense, watchful toes. Cole Forman's feet were smooth and white. Long toes writhed like grubs in the odorous dark. Barney's feet were hard and gnarled and stone cold. Jeremy's feet were like clubs, massive hammers. Hollowed, they held umbrellas and walking sticks.

I woke with a bad taste in my mouth and the dream sense of someone telling me that Kit's Bishop Foundation was missing.

“What do we have?” Frank asked.
“On which?”

“They’re linked.” Frank was being patient with me.

“Luboff,” I said. “Leslie Warren.” Two fingers up, I continued: “Runson, indirectly. Forman, same. Bishop.” I looked at my fingers. “Five,” I said.

“Jeremy, six,” said Frank, “and Mr. Warren, seven.”

“No connections,” I said.

“Yes,” said Frank. “They’re connected. Through the grant.”

“Okay . . . no motives.”

Frank looked at me. He shook his head. He’d either decided I was right or he was tired of the argument. I couldn’t tell. “Go back,” he said. “Go back to the studio. Find the motive.” He stared at me. “Find the motive.”

I think he was tired of the argument.

The door was still unlocked. Barney never did get around to putting that lock on. I went inside. I walked around the big room, looking at the various works. I smelled earth and turpentine.

I looked at the boxes scattered around the room. I opened one. It was a file; a collection of working drawings for something called *Lake Union*.

I looked around. Here a box; here a stack of canvases. There a stack, there a box. I looked at the box in front of me and at

the stack of canvases behind it. I found *Lake Union*. It took only a minute to recognize Barney's trademark: the clothing. Bikers, boaters, hikers . . . each wore a carefully detailed uniform that defined them in their activity. Most of the sketches in the box were of clothing.

The next logical step took me to the Bumbershoot box. This time it was jewelry. Sketch after sketch of earrings, necklaces, pins. A pin. A runner with a long arm reaching for a star.

I walked back to the house. The back door was easy. I found the phone and called Warren.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Warren, this is Nick Anderson."

"Yes?"

"Was anything else missing?"

Silence, while he thought: "No."

"Maybe a pin, a piece of jewelry?"

"Oh. Yes. Her lucky pin. She got it at a marathon. Figure reaching for an impossible star. She always wore it when she ran. That's why I didn't think of it."

I walked back to the studio and studied the sketches again. The pin was the item cut out of the billboard. Somehow, I didn't think Barney had seen it on Leslie Warren.

I trudged back to the house and called Frank. "So," he said. "We have a motive. I'll meet you there." He hung up. Holding the dead phone to my ear I said: "Thank you, Nick." I replaced the receiver. "Nice work."

We stood on the porch and waited for the door to open. When it did, Jeremy was there. He blazed. The light seemed to radiate from him. He must have been wearing every piece he owned. And there, in the center of his chest, the jogging pin.

Mrs. Bishop stood in a doorway down the hall. She looked as though she'd just started to order Jeremy not to answer the door. She stared at us and then realized what we were seeing. She sagged against the wall. Jeremy still stood, holding the door. Smiling and gleaming.

"Mrs. Bishop," I said. "May we come in?"

She straightened and motioned with her hand. Jeremy stepped back to let us in. We followed her to the library.

She sat. We stood. She stared into the fire and didn't invite us to sit. I looked at the painting.

Mrs. Bishop shook her head. "He didn't want *her*," she said. She stood and took a step toward the fireplace. For a min-

ute I thought she was going for the poker. She turned. All the mannered gestures were gone. She was fighting. She was protecting Jeremy. She moved in jerks and spasms, one clenched fist chopping the air. "Bitch!" she said. Her face was red and ugly. "Arrogant bitch! She thought he wanted *her*. He wanted the *pin*!"

We stood in a silent group. I was a little in awe at the power of this woman. Jeremy had come to the door of the room. He listened. He was not grinning. I felt sorry for him. He'd wanted a pin. A cheap little pin. And because of it Leslie Warren had died.

"She came here the day she disappeared," said Frank.

"No. That was the second time. She was here about four months back. She said Jeremy had attacked her. Jumped out at her while she was running. Tried to paw her breast. I explained. How Jeremy likes jewelry. How he wanted the pin. I thought she understood."

"Ah," said Frank, understanding something. "And when the board seat came empty she came back."

Mrs. Bishop wasn't listening. She was telling her story. She looked at Jeremy as she told it as though he were the only audience and she had to explain it to him. Explain what he'd done.

Jeremy listened carefully. I wondered what she'd do without him. When he was gone into some institution.

"I had a pin made. Jeremy wanted it, so I had one made." She looked at me. "Not some cheap piece of metal. I had it done in silver. I'd seen it on her that day.

"We were at Bumbershoot. Jeremy liked the billboard artist. He was painting jewelry when we stopped to watch. He wanted to put Jeremy's pin into it. He made a sketch."

Mrs. Bishop stirred the fire. She didn't use the heavy poker. She used a little one that stood beside the fireplace. She went back to her chair and sat. We were still standing.

"She came back," she nodded at Frank. "Yes, Mr. Santucci, she came back. She wanted the position on the Bishop Foundation. She'd tell about Jeremy's attempted rape if I refused her. I couldn't believe her." She pointed at me. "She stood right there, Mr. Anderson, with a smarmy look on her face. She thought she had me. She didn't know how I felt about Jeremy. And about the Foundation. I have a tradition to protect, and I'd never allow scum on that board."

I looked at Jeremy's feet. How could I have forgotten the prints? His were too big. Kit's

Bishop Foundation *was* missing from my dream. I hadn't seen her feet. I still couldn't see them under the floor-length skirt. Too small for me; large for a tall woman. With large hands.

"I grew angry. I was astonished. I told her that Jeremy had no interest in her. That I doubted any man did. She slapped me. Then Jeremy came in. She pointed at him. She screamed that he'd be locked up. He'd be incarcerated for the rest of his life. This 'nut,' she said; this 'rapist.'"

We all turned to look at Jeremy. He still stood in the doorway listening to his mother. His head was down. He had removed the pin. The rest of his jewelry seemed subdued, no longer flashing with such approbation as it had when he'd opened the door. His life had changed since then, and I think he knew it.

"She called him a rapist." Mrs. Bishop shuddered. "I ordered him out of the room. I took the poker and I hit her with it." She nodded at the huge piece of ironware hanging under the portrait. So it hadn't been my interest in the painting. She'd thought I was looking at the murder weapon.

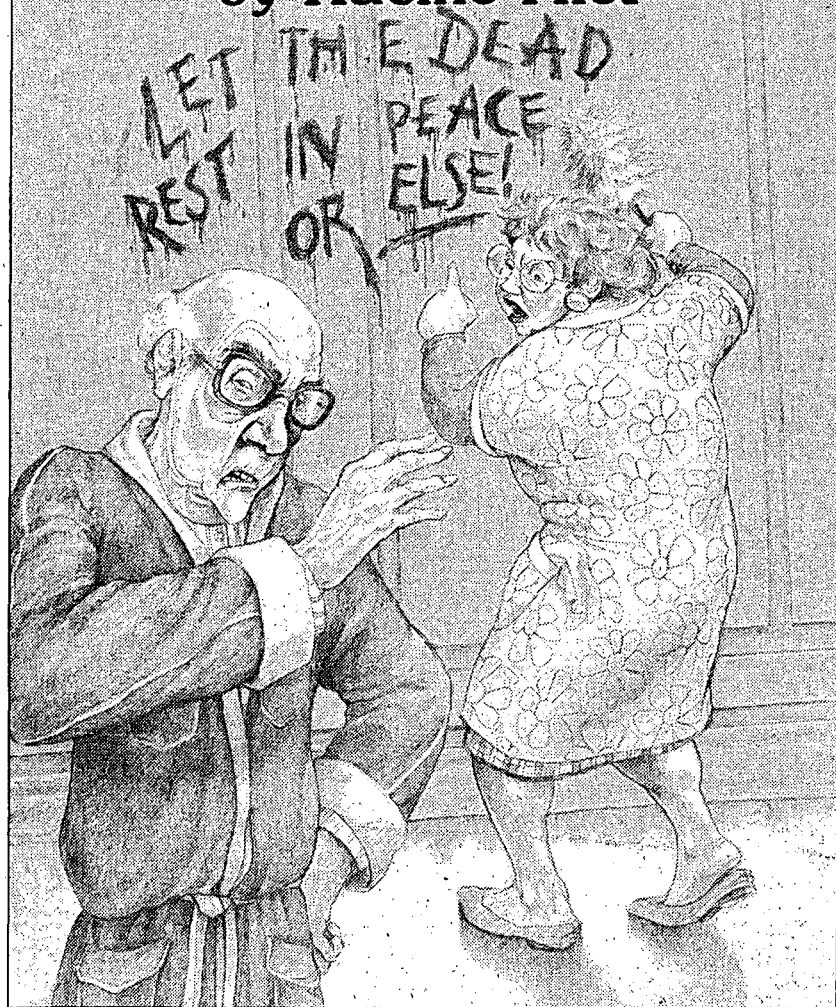
She went on: "Then I saw the article in the paper. About Barney Luboff. I realized that Leslie was working for the school board, spending my grant. I went one night and cut it. I cut the pin out of it."

"And then," said Frank, "you worried that Luboff might remember."

"Yes. I went back. At night. He was a little man. So light. I carried him to the bridge and threw him over. The fall would cover the blow I'd given him. I broke the rail." She shook her head. "So light. Just like a child." She started to cry.

The Haunted Critic

by Racine Hiet



Mr. Filch, the theater critic, was furious.

His grey pinstriped suit swam on his gaunt, bony body. The skin was pulled tightly on his face, revealing sharp cheekbones. He had a thin, pointed nose, and thick grey eyebrows perched above tiny, deep-set eyes, the left of which twitched continuously behind horn-rimmed glasses as he peered down at Willy Wilson, the actor, in the coffin.

How dare you drop dead, Willy? he thought angrily.

In the beginning of the summer, Willy Wilson had suddenly returned from the big city south of their town of Wakefield. He said he had come home to die. Of course Mr. Filch didn't believe him.

"Afraid of what I might write about you, Willy?" he said, sniffing.

"I am suffering from acute gastrointestinal distress," Willy answered. "And do you wonder, Freddie?"

"Everyone calls me Mr. Filch," Mr. Filch said.

"Well, I knew you way back when, when you were Freddie. as I was saying, *Freddie*, do you wonder that I'm dying? Sixty years of your abusive reviews has finally finished me off. It's a case of final massive injury to my internal system."

"Hmph. So you couldn't

stomach it, is that it?"

"What happened to your heart, Freddie?"

"Well, apparently, it's in a lot better shape than your stomach." He laughed, enjoying his joke.

Now it was the end of the summer and idiotic Willy Wilson had carried through with this ridiculousness and died.

It didn't surprise anyone in town that Willy chose Dorothy Donnelly, the owner of the Dead End Funeral Home, as the one to personally handle his death arrangements; she was loved by all and considered the kindest person in town. Not that Mr. Filch thought of kindness as a valuable human attribute. Dorothy often had guests stay with her, and even Mr. Filch, who had no friends—he was proud of that fact; it's quite an accomplishment to live all your life in the same town and manage to have not even one friend—was warmly welcomed by Dorothy whenever he returned to his house in town. Mr. Filch had to travel to the city and elsewhere all the time in order to see the plays he critiqued, especially those which Willy Wilson performed in.

Mr. Filch thought about dead Willy Wilson, and he felt desolate. He was a magnificent critic who could no longer partake of his most inspired crit-

icizing. How dare he? he thought once again. How dare that crock of an actor croak? Mr. Filch's situation was definitely critical.

"He seems so at peace in his satiny resting place, doesn't he, Mr. Filch?" said Al, owner of Al's Photography. "It's because you're not breathing down his neck any more."

"Al," he said, "you may think you're a big shot because you're into that loser photography."

"Laser photography . . ."

"Whatever you call that idiotic scientific stuff you waste your time with, but you know nothing at all about *art*. What I do, Al, is a work of art. Willy got what he deserved. He got more than he deserved. He got *me*. The best there is."

"The best there is at destroying another human being. Someday, Mr. Filch, you'll get what *you* deserve," Al replied.

Mr. Filch ignored him as he ignored all the others in town. So Willy Wilson had a lot of friends. Big deal.

Mr. Filch had to admit, though, as he peered down at Willy's thin black hair—died, obviously, long before Willy's trim body had—framing the pale, serene face, that Willy had never looked better than he did at his funeral.

It seemed that Willy had requested, before his death, that

Dorothy read a letter at his funeral addressed personally to Mr. Filch. Mr. Filch had never missed a live performance by Willy. So Willy assumed, rightly, that Mr. Filch would not miss Willy's final act.

"'As you hear this, Freddie,'" Dorothy read out loud, "'I'll be dead. For the last sixty years, I've had to swallow the hundreds of rotten reviews you've written about me. So let it be said on the record that you finally killed me. Literally. You started when I was only eight years old and I played a maple tree in the grade three play. You were a few years older and wrote reviews for the school paper. 'Willy Wilson calls himself an actor?'" you wrote. "I've seen mannequins that had more life in them. You call that performance—and I use the term with the wildest stretch of the imagination—a portrayal of a tree? The only thing Wilson has in common with the part is that both are made out of wood.'"

I do my job so well, Mr. Filch gloated. Oh, I am clever, so clever, he thought as the town people gasped, Poor Willy! and shook their heads sorrowfully.

"'Goodbye, Freddie,'" Dorothy read. "'Your lifelong victim, Willy Wilson.'"

"My name is Mr. Filch," Mr. Filch said.

There wasn't a dry eye as Willy's coffin was lowered into the ground. Except for those of Mr. Filch, who showed no remorse at all now that he suddenly realized that Willy's death, far from being an end to their fruitful relationship, would actually bring forward new inspiration to his illustrious career as a theater critic.

Mrs. Filch was pleased to be in his lovely house once again. It looked very much like him: tall, narrow, grey stucco, domelike ceilings, long, thin front door set between tiny narrow windows.

He was busy typing in his cluttered den, which was rather dusty and uncared for but impressive, all mahogany with a huge computer desk against one wall upon which sat an expensive computer and printer as well as a tape recorder for those times when he wished to dictate the words quickly before his gems could be forgotten. On the wall opposite his desk hung a large portrait that he was very fond of, taken of him in the throes of his writing passion. Passionately writing about Willy Wilson, of course. The idiotic woman he had once been married to insisted on having him photographed, she told him, as a re-

minder of why she had left him. Mr. Filch had the console television set that remained after all these years in his den, broken and unused, as a reminder as well. That stupid wife had tried to get his attention by moving it from their bedroom into his den, where she would proceed to turn it on at full volume while he tried to work. Naturally, the television gave in before he did. After all, in a battle of wills, what chance did Mrs. Filch have with a superior being like Mr. Filch?

His doorbell rang. With irritation, he left his work. He hoped it wasn't one of those snoop town people coming to bother him. Asking him for money for charity or something—over his dead body—or, worse, one of those grubby children taking a dare and then ringing his bell and staring up at him with a dumb little scared face.

He opened his door and found an older woman with large red glasses and lots of puffy reddish-blond hair around a robust face. She was quite tall and full-figured, a rather voluptuous figure wrapped in a loose red dress.

"What do you want?"

"I've come about the job."

"The job?"

"As your housekeeper."

He had put the ad in months

ago after Mrs. Smoget left him. He lost every housekeeper. They told him that as long as he wasn't home, they were fine. But as soon as Mr. Filch returned to live in the house, they couldn't stand it. He was too mean, they said. People are just too sensitive, Mr. Filch grumbled to himself. Such thin skins, all of them. Just like Willy Wilson. He brightened suddenly as he remembered what he had just written about the dead actor.

He looked at the woman who was beaming at him. I'll soon wipe that stupid smile off your face, foolish woman. Everybody in town was too scared to work for him. He didn't know this smiling Buddha. "Who are you?"

"My name is Mildred Tee." She put out her hand, which he ignored. "I'm a widow, and I've recently left the city. I thought that a woman my age might find it easier to get work in a small town like Wakefield. Not so much competition. People have told me that there's not much in Wakefield, at least not live bodies." She laughed, a deep throaty laugh.

Everybody knew that Wakefield housed the big city's cemeteries. Strangers liked to joke that Wakefield was a ghost town. Ha, ha, big joke.

"When I got to town," she

continued, "the people I met said, 'Go speak to Dorothy Donnelly. She'll help you.' Well, I did, and she put me up and offered me a job. But I knew she was just trying to be helpful; she didn't really have any work for me to do. Then she told me you were looking for a housekeeper and showed me your ad. The wages you mentioned in it will do me just fine, with the room and board. I've been a housewife for forty years, Mr. Filch. I'll do a good job taking care of your house. And it's a really nice one, I can see."

Mr. Filch was ready to send her away. She was the horrible chatty type, but when she admired his house he thought, at least the insipid woman has good taste.

"Can I come in?"

He showed her around the house while she told him her life story, as if he could care less. He had important work to finish in his study.

"I was married to Ernie Tee for forty years. Ernie had a way of putting things in a nutshell because he didn't believe in wasting words. Or anything else for that matter. 'Waste not, want not,' that was his motto. Now, I'm quite the opposite, Mr. Filch; you get me going sometimes and I just keep on going..."

"I wish you would just keep

on going," Mr. Filch said, "right out that door." But he did need a housekeeper.

"Oh, Mr. Filch!" She continued. "It has something to do, I guess, with living with a man like Ernie for so many years. And human nature. You see someone saving something for so long, and you just get an irresistible urge to spend it all at once. Well, Ernie saved all those words, and I just spend them."

"Listen, Mildred, if you want to have some money to spend, you'll need to keep your job with me. The best way I know how is to keep your mouth shut."

She giggled. "Oh, Mr. Filch! I know you aren't really as mean as everyone says. I have an excellent understanding of human motivation, if I do say so myself. And I might as well, because I can see that you certainly won't." She laughed again. "When you've been married to a man like Ernie, you have to be a good judge of facial expression and body language and such, and understand motivation through action rather than words."

"Read my lips, Mildred. *Shut up*. Ah, now here we are, and not soon enough, believe me. This is your room. I hope it's not too small for your mouth?"

"No bars on the window, Mr.

Filch? Dorothy told me you have the most awful time trying to keep your help. But not me, Mr. Filch. You're not going to lose me. I'm going to clean your house till it shines, and I'm not going to leave you no matter how you rant and rave. Because I understand you. I understood Ernie, too."

"Tell me, Mildred, did he kill himself?"

"Oh, Mr. Filch, you're so awful," Mildred grinned.

Mr. Filch frowned. "So are you, Mildred, believe me, awful, awful, awful."

"At least you're not brief, are you, Mr. Filch? I've read your reviews. You're very colorful."

"That's true," he said. At least she was saying things now that were interesting to him.

"But Ernie Tee, as I've said before, was a firm believer in brevity. It did make a nice little conversation piece, though, when I would say I was married to Mr. T, get it? Or even better, when I told people that Ernie liked to abbreviate his name to E.T. But I'm transgressing . . ."

"You, Mildred, are a transgression against human life as we know it."

" . . . what I wanted to tell you was that I do so admire your colorful work, Mr. Filch, especially the stuff you wrote about that actor, Willy . . . Willy . . ."

"Willy Wilson," he said eagerly. His favorite subject. Other than himself, of course.

"Poor man. I know he was buried today."

"Yes, I was at his funeral."

"I waited till it was over, out of respect, before I talked to you about the job. To tell you the truth, though, I could hardly wait." She paused. Mr. Filch didn't think she had it in her. "It has to be a terrible strain on you not having Willy Wilson around any more after all these years, Mr. Filch. Who else could inspire you to such depths of . . . of . . ."

"Yes, such depths of brilliant pungent criticism as the world has never known. But you're wrong, Mildred. If that pathetic excuse for an actor thought he could get rid of me by simply dying, he was gravely mistaken." He was becoming quite animated. "Listen to this. 'Nothing can come out of an artist that is not in the man. Nothing can be created out of nothing. Willy Wilson had plenty of nothing,' " he shouted triumphantly. "You see? I can't stop the flow. To tell you the truth, I think I was getting a little stale after sixty years of ripping Willy's performances to shreds. But since he died, I'm positively *inspired*."

"I can see you're a man with a mission."

"Yes, yes, Mildred." She wasn't quite as stupid as she seemed. "I'll *never* let the world forget that Willy was the worst actor who ever lived. Or died. Come see what I wrote right after the funeral."

He took her into his den.

"I will make this office so shiny clean, Mr. Filch, that you will be able to see your reflection in those floors. You're a man with a mission and so am I, Mr. Filch. So am I."

There was no doubt about it. He disliked her as he disliked every other human being other than himself, but he didn't hate her quite as much as he had thought he would.

He turned on his computer.

"Oh," she said with admiration in her voice. "I've never been able to master these contraptions."

"Just read these words, Mildred. I'm sure you'll find them quite brilliant."

"Today," she read, " 'Willy Wilson was buried. Death was obviously the tailor-made role for the man. It was the only thing he ever did well. As far as I'm concerned, Willy Wilson always died on stage.' "

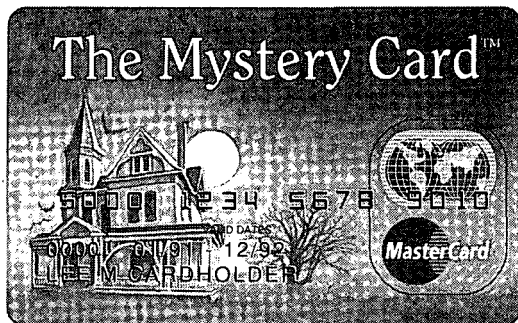
He could see from the expression on her face that she was overcome. "Brilliant, yes?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Filch. Brilliant, as always."

"I'm going to stay in this den

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every day and let all this brilliance keep on pouring out of me."

"And I'll be right here with you, Mr. Filch."

And she did clean his house better than anyone before her. She acted as if her work for him was the most important thing that she had to do, now or ever. She was a woman with a mission. And that mission was to aid him in his life's work. Three weeks had gone by, and still the words flowed from him. He was grateful to Willy Wilson for having died.

And then strange events began to take place.

One day, he discovered that his portrait was hung with his face to the wall. On the back of the framed portrait were the words: Who are you? Have you looked inside your soul lately? Soon it will be too late.

Mildred was beside herself with worry. He had to calm her down.

"Who could have done something like this, Mr. Filch? I was home all day. I didn't let anyone in here except Dorothy Donnelly, who visited when you were with your newspaper editor. Oh, Mr. Filch, how could this have happened?"

"Now, be quiet, Mildred."

"I won't let anything happen to you, Mr. Filch. I promise you that."

"Okay, okay. Just leave me be now." Hysterical woman. But he did wonder how something like that could have occurred.

Then a week later when he went into his den, he found huge smudged red letters written across his wall. *LET THE DEAD REST IN PEACE. OR ELSE!*

When Mildred saw the wall, she screeched. "What's going on? Oh, my god, it looks like blood."

"Don't go on and on, Mildred. We don't know that it's blood, do we?"

He could see that she was furious. "I just cleaned that wall yesterday. And now look at it, Mr. Filch!"

He had to admit that his new housekeeper took her job very seriously indeed.

Mildred, adjusting her red glasses on her nose, went closer to the wall and screeched once more.

"Do you have to yell so loudly? I have delicate ears."

"Sorry, Mr. Filch. But what does this mean? And why the words, 'or else?'"

"How am I supposed to know the answer to that? Be reasonable, Mildred, if that's possible."

"You don't suppose . . ." She gulped. "Oh, Mr. Filch, I'm afraid to tell you what I'm thinking."

"Oh, rejoice, rejoice, for once she's not going to tell me what she's thinking. Though if the truth be known, Mildred, I've often wondered if you're capable of thinking. I do believe your mind bypasses thinking and just spurts out drivel like some kind of fertilizer dispenser."

She laughed. "Oh, Mr. Filch, you're so awful."

"And so are you, Mildred."

But then she remembered, unfortunately, to tell him what it was that she was afraid to tell him. Such things were inevitable, Mr. Filch realized.

"Could it be, Mr. Filch, that 'you know who' is very angry with you?"

"I don't know who 'you know who' is," he answered impatiently.

Her eyes darted around the room and she lowered her voice. "Willy Wilson. You don't suppose he's upset with you about the things you've been saying about him?"

"He's dead, Mildred."

"But that's just the point, isn't it?"

"What point? As if you ever have a point, except for that tiny pinpoint that masquerades as your brain."

"*Let the dead rest in peace.*" She read the words off the wall in an ominous voice. "*Or else.*"

She shuddered. "I think you've enraged Willy Wilson's ghost, Mr. Filch."

"Oh, please, Mildred. What nonsense you spout. There's no such thing as ghosts."

"Then you explain what's been happening in this office of yours."

Mr. Filch hated to admit it, but he was getting nervous, and for the first time in his life, he had a difficult time that night falling asleep.

The next morning, he found Mildred scrubbing his office on her hands and knees. Then she sprayed the air. Disinfecting his den, she told him. After that, she took a cross from inside the pocket of her house-dress, swung it about, and chanted, at which time Mr. Filch shouted, "*Enough*," and threw her out of his den.

He turned his computer on and, without reading over the words he had written the day before, printed them out. When it was finished, he read. "Any fool can criticize and many of them do. Critics are to good theater what laxatives are to good health; sometimes necessary, usually unpleasant, and always unmentionable in polite company. What a miserable

thing it is that nature, when she invented, manufactured, and patented her artists, contrived to make critics out of the chips that were left. It is much easier to be critical, *Freddie*, than to be correct. *Stop.*"

"AAAAAH," screamed Mr. Filch.

Mildred bolted into the room, waving her cross in front of her. "I'll save you, Mr. Filch," she cried and pounced on him, sending him crashing to the floor, smothering him while shielding him with her body from any evil force that might befall him.

"Get off me, Mildred."

She did, and he got to his feet, smoothing his clothes. "It's Willy Wilson, isn't it?"

"Stop being ridiculous. There is no such thing as ghosts."

"Why did you scream, then?"

"If he thinks he's going to get away with trying to scare me off..."

"Who, Mr. Filch?"

"Who else, you imbecile. Willy, of course. The nerve of the man, calling me *Freddie*."

"I thought you didn't believe in ghosts."

"Of course not, you idiotic pea brain." He clenched his fist at the air. "We'll see who wins this fight."

"Mr. Filch, who are you talking to?"

"Willy Wilson, of course, you

stupid, hysterical, superstitious excuse for a female."

"Willy Wilson, the *ghost*, Mr. Filch?"

That night Mr. Filch tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He's not going to win, he thought. He thought up some wonderfully vicious new things to write about Willy Wilson and scrambled to his den filled with new vigor and delight at his own wit. He rewound his tape eagerly, then stopped at a point that seemed the proper place to begin dictating. He heard a voice. "*Where is your heart, Freddie? Stop before it is too late.*"

His heart stopped. He broke into a sweat and ran to his bedroom where he locked the door and hid his head under the covers.

The next morning, he didn't get out of bed. Or the next morning after that. Mildred was very concerned about him.

"I'll take a picture of your den tonight with your camera, okay?" Mildred asked. "You know, the area around your desk. I've heard that if there are any supernatural beings around, they can be seen in a photo when it's developed. Exposed, if you understand what I mean."

Mr. Filch understood what

Mildred meant, which truly terrified him. First, he thought, you start understanding idiotic, inferior human beings. And before you know it, you *are* seeing ghosts. But he nodded to Mildred from within his covers.

The next day, however, Mr. Filch gave himself a stern talking to and went back to work. I am being as foolish and morose as the rest of the human race. And I'm much too superior to allow myself to fall to their level, he told himself.

But three weeks later, Mr. Filch appeared so full of despair as he wandered like a zombie through the streets of Wakefield that Dorothy Donnelly, coming upon him after finishing some grocery shopping, invited him over for tea and homemade bread. He was in such a bad state that he actually accepted her invitation.

He seemed hardly aware of what he ate or drank. His right eye, as well as his left eye, now twitched continuously behind the horn-rimmed glasses—he said it was a nervous reaction to Willy Wilson's night visits.

"Willy Wilson—the *late* Willy Wilson—is visiting you?" Dorothy asked.

He nodded sadly. "He's haunting me, Dorothy." His dome-shaped head, completely bald except for white tufts of

hair above his ears, glistened with droplets of perspiration. "It's a bloody nightmare."

He raised himself from his chair, mopped his brow and naked pate with a blue handkerchief taken from his white shirt pocket, returned it, and then reached into his pants pocket. He tossed a photograph on the table in front of Dorothy. "Look at that. Can you see him? Willy Wilson's spirit is sitting in front of *my* computer."

He sighed. "I have to tell you, Dorothy, these night visits of Willy's ghost are really putting quite a damper on my creativity."

"I can well understand that, Mr. Filch." She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Dorothy," he pleaded, "I don't know what to do. He changes everything I write. He writes down words like . . . like . . ." He broke down.

"Like what, Mr. Filch?"

"Riveting." A grimace of pain. "'Awe-inspiring.'" He cried in agony, "What should I do?"

"*Stop* doing it, Mr. Filch. It's the only possible answer."

Mr. Filch suddenly pounded his fist on the table. "Impossible. I will *never* give in to that . . . that *actor*. And I gag as I say that word, Dorothy, believe me."

Dorothy Donnelly shook her

head sadly. "Oh, Mr. Filch, I do believe you. But what, pray, is to become of you?"

That night in bed, Mr. Filch awoke suddenly and thought he heard something coming from the den. He decided that no longer would any ghost, especially Willy Wilson's, be permitted to intimidate him. I will work tonight in my own den, he vowed, on my own computer, and I will write what *I* want to write.

He reached out to the table beside his bed and picked up his glasses. He was shocked to find the glass in both frames shattered.

"No, no, no," he cried with frustration. He put them on. "I don't care if I'm half blind. Do you hear me, Willy? *I will* write what I want to write. And you can't stop me. No one can stop me."

Mr. Filch stomped into his den, bumping into his desk, then sat down and placed his fingers on the keyboard.

"Baa, baa," a voice rang out.

Mr. Filch froze, paralyzed with terror as he squinted and saw before him the late Willy Wilson all dressed up as a woolly lamb.

"So?" Willy's ghost said to Mr. Filch, one woolly arm on a woolly hip. "I was just an innocent little kid. But what did you write about me?"

Mr. Filch's face was ghostly white and his gaunt body trembled in his deep blue terry robe. "I said that you were so b-a-a, b-a-a, b-a-d."

"And—?"

His voice quivered. "I said: 'Mary had a little lamb, Who fleeced his audience every day, And everywhere that Mary's lamb went, The audience was sure to go the other way.'"

"You thought you were clever, Freddie. You did that to me for every performance in my career, what was left of it. I even tried to move far away. But wherever I went, you went. You know something, Freddie? When I was performing, I knew where to look to find the one person in the room who didn't like me even if everyone else was clapping. It was like a knife in my heart. And you were always there."

Mr. Filch stared at the ghost in sheep's clothing and whimpered.

"Well, now it's my turn to haunt *you*. You're going to re-write every one of those reviews, Freddie. And you can't escape me any more than I could escape you. I'll always know where to find you. We're tied together for all eternity, Freddie."

Mr. Filch stumbled toward

the ghost. "No," he screamed. "No. You can't do this to me." He swung at Willy's spirit, tried to clutch him in his hands and destroy him, but his hands went right through Willy Wilson's body and touched nothing. "I won't let you do this to me." He fell into a crumpled mass on the floor and sobbed.

"You did it to yourself, Freddie," the voice said. "Go back to your desk," he commanded. "Now I want to see some 'glowing,' 'sparkling,' and 'spellbinding' words on that paper."

"Yes, Willy," a broken Mr. Filch mumbled under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," he said a little louder.

"I still can't hear you."

"Yes, your miraculous, brilliant lordship of the theater."

"Go on."

"Your effervescent, scintillating kingship of the world stage."

"Go on."

Dorothy Donnely had invited two good friends in for tea and her homemade bread.

In the kitchen, she heard Mildred Tee's voice say, "Mmm . . . mouthwatering, oven-hot slices of your bread, Dorothy, to go with the cold snow. As they say, 'Few things are

more beautiful than a single snowflake.' Unfortunately, they seldom come that way. But Ernie's words sure did. If he was here, he would beckon all of us to the table with, 'Our daily bread.'"

The friends laughed together.

Dorothy said, "I know Mr. Filch deserved whatever he got, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for him when I visited him today in the mental institution."

Al, the owner of Al's Photography, said, "If we hadn't fought back, Willy would never have known any peace."

Dorothy said, "We should all thank Mildred—the one who cleaned house, and cleaned Mr. Filch's clock." She touched the bag that contained the reddish-blond wig, red glasses, clothes, and cosmetics belonging to Mildred Tee.

Willy Wilson gripped Dorothy's hand. "I have to thank you, my good friends, for giving me back my life."

Dorothy said, "Mildred was your best performance ever, Willy. Mr. Filch believed in your character completely. You finally had him as your captive audience."

"I had a lot of help from my friends. Al, I couldn't have pulled it off without all your help and your equipment. Tak-

ing out the insides of that television set and replacing it with the laser and hologram, putting the speaker in the light fitting, and the great job you did of doctoring that photograph—the special effects were *inspired*, as Mr. Filch would say. And you both were so convincing at my funeral, that I think I have some tough acting competition.”

They laughed.

“It’s funny how one day can change your life,” Willy said seriously. “When I learned at that science exhibit in the city that being buried alive is dead easy, as long as you have a hundred and twenty cubic feet of air for each twenty-four hours for one person, the information just sat there in my head for awhile and then, suddenly, the idea came to me. But without my good friends, it would have remained just an idea.”

They ate for a while in silence.

Then Dorothy said, “I still can’t help feeling sorry for poor Mr. Filch. I don’t regret my part in it,” she said. “There was

no other way to save you, Willy. But when Mr. Filch was sitting here in my kitchen, he was such a stricken man . . .”

“He could have stopped any time,” Al reminded her. “If he had wanted to. He could have saved himself. But he wouldn’t let go of Willy.”

“I think,” Willy said, “that only the most truly kind and loving person—a person such as you, Dorothy—would have gone that far to restore a friend’s shattered dream.”

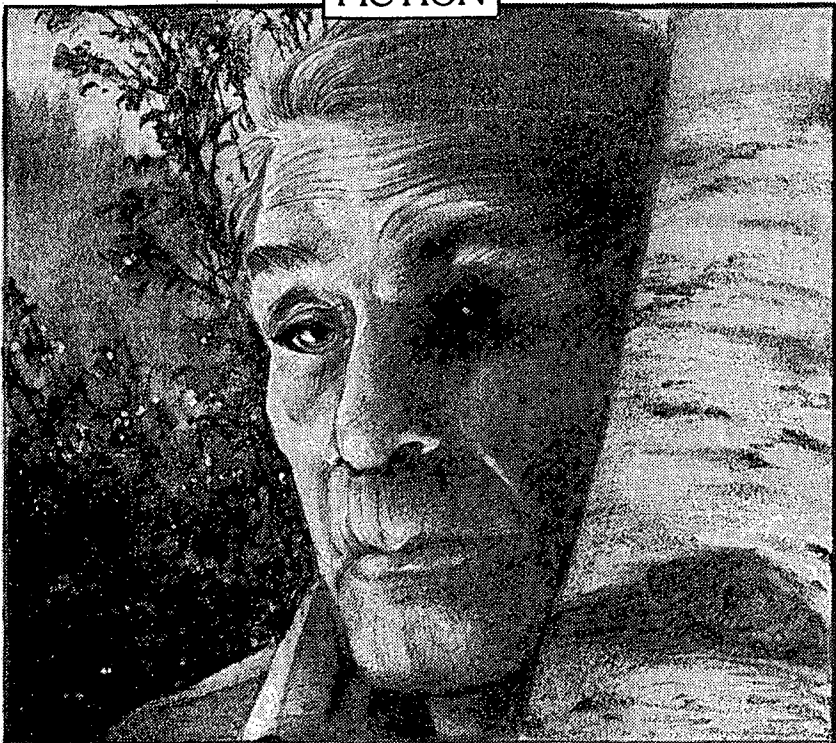
“All those words you made him write, Willy,” Al said, suppressing his laughter. “Let the record show that Mr. Filch, the theater critic, is no longer with us because he broke down from acute indigestion and an overdose of high sugar content.”

“Freddie Filch couldn’t stomach it,” Willy Wilson said.

They finished eating and all agreed that the homemade bread, as well as the recent events in their lives was, to put it in the succinct words of Mildred’s husband Ernie, “out of this world.”

In a nutshell.

FICTION



An American Beech

by James Finnegan

Timothy L. Standish 9/10

Illustration by Timothy Standish

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The maul missed the steel wedge, bounced off the log, and nearly flew out of Buckner's hands. As luck would have it, arresting the short flight of the eight pound projectile involved an awkward twist of the torso, triggering a dull pain in ribs and hip; a reminder that, as yet, he wasn't a hundred percent.

He decided to blame it on Emmett. The old man's presence had disturbed his concentration.

Joe Buckner had been splitting logs for close to a week, slowly turning into firewood the heap of discarded crooks, runts, and trunk flares the loggers had left behind. Having been laid up for two months, he'd seized upon this as a unique way to rebuild his strength. At first, it seemed he was averaging about one miss for every good whack. But after a couple of days, he was, to use his own words, "getting into the swing of things." By the end of the week he was topping off his second cord of wood. Granted, it was a ragged collection, but as long as each piece could fit into Harv's wood stove, it was good enough.

One thing he hadn't expected was the sedentary companionship of Emmett Fox. Thin, grizzled, bent at the spine, a spectre in crusty bibbed overalls, Em-

mett had materialized for the first time that morning, looking about as old and unsteady as any old man could look. Buckner doubted he could pick his shuffling feet up high enough to clear small stones; yet the old man had managed to slip in behind him like a creeping mist.

Repositioning himself, Buckner swung the maul again, this time striking the wedge a solid blow. He swung again. "The man's a recluse," he grunted under his breath just as the maul swept down and hit home. "Doesn't talk to anyone," again the maul struck home, smothering his comment under the thudding impact. He swung again. "Won't know he's around." The sound of tearing wood fibers greeted the blow. He slammed the blunt end of the maul home once more and a tapered split, the length of the maul's handle, appeared. Buckner stopped swinging. "Well, my foot, Harv!" he muttered aloud, bending over to pick up a second wedge.

"Foot bother you, son?"

"No, Emmett, no," said Buckner over his shoulder. "Foot's okay."

Emmett wasn't supposed to be a bother. That's what Buckner had been told: just an antisocial wood-monk who lived in a shack half hidden in a small

aspens grove across the road from Harv's vacation cabin. Yet there he was, seated on a runt of a log less than a short toss behind him, comfy as a worm on a wet stump, whittling away at a stub of kindling, and . . . watching.

That evening, Buckner puzzled over Emmett Fox's unexpected behavior, and the more he pondered it the more it intrigued him. So much so he decided the subject deserved a long distance phone call.

"That's strange," said Harv. "I've owned that cabin for the last five years. He returned my wave once or twice when I first bought the place, then he just got scarce. The old guy's a regular mole."

"Harv," said Buckner, "you're up here, at most, maybe thirty days a year. Is that about right?"

"That's about right."

"So the rest of the time, about eleven months' worth, when he's not concerned with avoiding you, he could be traipsing around here as naked as a jaybird and you wouldn't know about it."

"I suppose." There was a pause. "What do you mean, 'avoiding me'? Why me, in particular?"

"Well, he's certainly not avoiding me," said Buckner.

"So, why me then?"

"Harv, do you think Emmett knows you're a cop?"

"That's possible, lieutenant. I haven't kept it a secret from the locals."

A dwell settled over the line.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Harv.

Buckner smiled. "I take it then there may be something about Emmett you've forgotten to tell me? Moonshine? Poaching? Likes the cut of a male jib? What?"

"Nope, none of the above. But you're damn right, lieutenant. There might be something."

Another pause. Buckner waited a few seconds.

"Savoring this in silence, Harv?" he said finally. "I'm only going to be here three more weeks."

"Sorry, I was trying to remember the details."

"Well, how about remembering out loud?"

"Okay, lieutenant. But you've got to keep in mind the story was told to me by an old duffer whom I met only once, and he was only obliging because Milt's Tavern was empty except for the two of us and Milt, and Milt wouldn't buy him a drink, so I did."

"Right," muttered Buckner.

"The way he told it, Emmett used to be one half of Everett and Emmett, identical twins. When they were in their late

teens, a new teacher came to the little schoolhouse there in Palatine Valley. The school, incidentally, was closed up before World War II and turned into a grange hall. Grippen's Hardware stands there now. Only that's not the original building any more; it was torn down some time ago."

"Okay, Harv," said Buckner impatiently.

"Yeah, well, anyway, the teacher was female, in her late twenties, and somewhat of a free spirit."

Buckner interrupted. "So a tragic love affair developed between this teacher and one or two of her students. Between her and Everett, or Emmett, or both Everett and Emmett. Go on."

"It was kind of like that, lieutenant. Except the twins weren't her students. Not many rural teenagers in those days finished high school. Everett and Emmett supplied the school with firewood and did odd jobs around the grounds. You've got to remember, lieutenant, this supposedly happened back in the early twenties."

"Okay."

"There was a love affair, though, you're right about that. But nobody ever found out which one of the twins did the loving. Folks back then had a

suspicion that the lady had seduced one of the boys, but didn't know whether it was Everett or Emmett."

"Or both?" injected Buckner.

"No, this guy's story had only one twin involved with her. Anyway, as it turned out, I guess this teacher was just doing her rural thing, you know—big city girl reads *Walden Pond* and is drawn irresistibly out to where the woodchucks roam."

"So," interrupted Buckner again, "she soon got bored and handed in her resignation. Broke a lovesick bumpkin's heart. Packed her bags. But never quite managed to leave town."

There was laughter on the other end. "God, you're beautiful, lieutenant. Yeah, that's about it. They found her and the bags in the schoolhouse. She was laid out on the floor, neat as a pin, feet together, hands folded across her waist, and a dent the size of a half dollar in the peak of her forehead. No blood."

"That—is very interesting," said Buckner.

"What, the absence of blood?"

"No. But go on."

"The old guy in Milt's Tavern said she was probably hit with a small sledge hammer. Just once, and expertly, like a farmer might put down a pig

or cow for slaughter. It's safer, tidier, and less expensive than a bullet. And, by the way, they never found the weapon."

"Okay," said Buckner.

"Now, here is the *real* interesting part, lieutenant. Nobody was able to figure out if the killer was Everett or Emmett. So neither one got charged with the crime. Oh sure, they got taken to the county seat and questioned, and that was back in the rubber hose days."

"So, the crime went unpunished."

"Well, not exactly, lieutenant. According to this old guy, the local folks there in Palatine Valley rounded up Everett and Emmett one night and dragged them into a community meeting. Held it right in the schoolhouse, as a matter of fact. They gave the boys a choice: leave the valley forever or face shunning."

"Face what?"

"Shunning. That's what the old guy called it. Something the local preacher cooked up. It means everybody is forbidden to speak to you, or look at you, or even act like you exist."

"Okay," said Buckner.

"Anyway, I guess the boys chose to stay, and got shunned, and that's why Emmett still acts like a mole today. End of story."

"What about Everett?"

"He died a long time ago. Shunned to death." There was a soft burst of laughter. "Sorry, lieutenant. I don't know how Everett died. I was just remembering how Milt finally brought the old guy a beer, on the house, and said how he thought that was the best damn story he'd ever heard but he didn't believe it. Milt said he'd been living in Palatine Valley for over fifteen years and never noticed anybody deliberately snubbing Emmett Fox."

"Times change," said Buckner.

"That's just about what the old guy said, lieutenant. He was kind of put out because Milt didn't believe him. He told Milt the valley folks actually felt the Fox twins were, in a way, victimized by this woman, but that their Christian hearts just couldn't rest easy if they let the act go unpunished. He said the effectiveness of the shunning died away as the people that attended that community meeting died away. And since there's not many of that original group left, that's why Milt hasn't noticed it. But Milt still wouldn't believe him."

"Did you *check* the story out?"

"No, I didn't, lieutenant. I guess I kind of sided with Milt. He's my local expert on Palatine Valley. Why? Do you believe the story?"

"It's interesting," said Buckner. "Do me a favor, will you?"

"Uh-oh," said Harv. "You're supposed to be on medical leave. No police work, just log therapy, remember?"

"Indulge me," said Buckner. "I'm bored. Get on the phone to the county seat here. Nothing deep or elaborate. Just see if you can find anything on Emmett Fox's being arrested back in the twenties. Also, anything on the schoolteacher."

"I hear and obey, lieutenant," sighed Harv.

"Thank you so much, sergeant."

"Anything else?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Go into my office tomorrow and leave a memo on my desk that states, 'Buckner owes Harv three wedges.' I'm slowly beating yours into mushrooms."

Buckner toyed with the old tale of the Fox twins well into the night. Maybe the old man had been purposely avoiding Harv because he was a cop. So why wasn't he, Buckner, getting the same treatment? Any clear head would realize there was a good possibility he was a cop, too. Why this sudden change in one Emmett Fox, prime suspect in a barroom-story murder that was supposed to have been committed some seventy years ago? Before his head hit the pillow, Buck-

ner found himself mulling over the thought that maybe, just maybe, he might have been sniffing around an old dog's bone without knowing it.

The next morning he threw a few essentials into a shoulder bag and headed toward the log pile, but instead of attacking the first log of the day, he continued walking along the dirt road that led back into the woods. Harv had described the logging operation to him. Five men; two giant, winch-equipped tractors called timberjacks; and one mobile crane towing a platform mounted with a five foot circular saw—against thirty-five acres of assorted hemlock, sugar maple, beech, poplar, birch, and an occasional oak.

According to Harv, the timberjacks would roar out of the woods and down the dirt road about every half hour, each one dragging two, sometimes three topped and de-limbed tree trunks at a time. Some trunks had hollow bases: these were cut off by the huge circular saw and thrown into the discard pile. Others branched out into double trunks: these were cut at the branch and that was thrown into the discard pile. Gaping peckerholes or grossly amputated stubs of limbs were

also cut away and dumped. And sometimes a perfectly good log was thrown on the pile by mistake.

Harv said the loggers estimated that what they had discarded would yield about forty cords of firewood. They didn't want it, so he gladly accepted it.

When the operation ended, not a weed grew in the road. The center, over which the trees were dragged, had been packed down to a near polish. Buckner kept to the center and was soon beyond the tree line and into the woods. Once satisfied that the log pile was out of sight, he stepped off the road behind an uprooted aspen, and angled north toward an area dominated by hemlocks.

He regretted never having gotten to wander through Harv's woods before he went and sold off twenty percent of its prime. Toppings and limbs were strewn everywhere. Stumps were not that plentiful, but the felled remnants of one large tree could create a wide impasse.

When he finally reached the hemlocks, he changed direction again; it was the final leg of an elongated U-turn. Ducking low branches, weaving between trees that had survived the loggers, skirting around the remains of those that hadn't, he

reached a point where the shadows of the forest were about to give way to a sunlit field. A few steps to the side, just a minor adjustment, and off to the southeast, he had what he was looking for: an unobstructed view of the distant log pile.

Buckner sat down on the soft needle-covered ground, rummaged around in the shoulder bag, and removed a pair of binoculars. He wasn't at all sure Emmett would appear. The old man was probably tuned into the sound of the maul's impact on the wedges. No sounds meant no activity, which, most likely, would mean no Emmett. But so what? If what he was doing looked silly, who would know?

How long had it been since he'd been on a stakeout? Five, six years? Chalk it up to an off-duty impulse, long on curiosity and long on time. Plus it felt good: no pressure to be alert, no cramped car seat, cold van, or dirty vacant room; just a warm gentle breeze, blue sky, cottony clouds, a scenic valley floor stretching out in the distance, and the companionship of Mother Nature at her best.

He focused on the log pile. Nothing. He swept the field before him, sighting in on clusters of wildflowers. A woodchuck popped up. "Hey, fatso, I

see you," mumbled Buckner as the woodchuck stood motionless on its hind legs. Then it dropped to all fours and waddled off on woodchuck business.

A hawk soared above in overlapping circles, just a speck to the naked eye. Buckner swung the glasses up. Suddenly the hawk's wings folded back into a V, and it dived toward the earth. Buckner followed it. Like a spearhead, it fell faster and faster. Buckner felt a chill wash up his spine. The hawk continued to plummet. A tree line suddenly appeared in the binoculars. "Brakes, you son of a bitch!" groaned Buckner.

And the decrepit fire escape gave way again beneath his feet, and he was falling through the air along with a tangle of rusty iron rails.

Buckner pulled the binoculars from his face. "Damn," he muttered.

The memory was all too fresh: a telltale cat with a bloodstain on its fur suddenly appearing outside an apartment that had been meticulously scrubbed down by the suspect. Buckner rushing out to corral it. The fire escape collapsing. The cat leaping back through the window, and winding up in the arms of a female plainclothes. Buckner winding up in an open dumpster five stories below; but not before most

of the fire escape got there first.

"I didn't need that, hawk," said Buckner, reaching into the shoulder bag, pulling out a bottle of beer. There was another one inside, and he would have brought a couple more but decided they'd turn warm by the time he got to them. So he'd filled up a thermos he'd found in Harv's cabin instead.

He drained off a long, cold swallow. A small yellow bird bounced by, like a skipping stone on a lake of air. Brightly colored moths flitted here and there over the field. Two blackbirds streaked over the grass-tops, heading like darts toward the log pile, then veered away. Buckner picked up the binoculars. Sure enough: the crooked fleck he'd seen in the flight path of the blackbirds was Emmett Fox, poised a few yards from the north side of the logs.

"What is it, Emmett?" whispered Buckner. "Show me, come on, show me." He watched as Emmett turned his head in the direction of Harv's cabin.

"Come on, show me, Emmett," coaxed Buckner, and Emmett Fox suddenly broke into a flutter of short, quick steps that brought him up next to the logs. "Good boy, Emmett."

The old man bent down over the projecting trunk of a log that Buckner had exposed for

the first time a couple of days previously. It was sheathed in smooth gray bark and was as wide as a fifty gallon drum. Buckner watched as Emmett carefully inserted one bony arm into a small, dark opening formed by the crossing of two other logs over the gray one. Four times he pulled his arm from the hole, scooping out handfuls of sod mixed with twigs or bark chips. Buckner waited expectantly but was disappointed all four times; and again on the fifth, when Emmett's hand came out of the hole empty. The old man made no attempt at a sixth, but straightened up as best he could and tottered away from the side of the pile.

"Well, well," sighed Buckner, lowering the binoculars after Emmett had retired to the upturned runt of a log he'd sat on the day before. "Sorry I have to leave you out in the sun like that, Emmett. But let's wait until I hear from Harv tonight before we resume splitting those logs."

Reaching into the shoulder bag again, Buckner pulled out a bag of potato chips. In the distance he could just make out the fleck that was Emmett Fox, his head turned slightly, looking toward Harv's cabin.

"Patience, Emmett," said Buckner, picking up the beer.

"E dna Smith," said Harv's voice. "Twenty-six years old."

Originally from Albany, New York. Lived in Palatine Valley for seven months. School-teacher. Died April 2, 1921. No record of next of kin."

"Interesting," said Buckner.

"The records people at the county seat confirmed that during the first week in April of that same year one Edna Smith was a homicide victim. Died from a single blow to the head delivered by a blunt instrument. Massive skull fracture. Everett and Emmett Fox, both age seventeen, were held for questioning in the case but released. No charges."

"Seventeen," said Buckner.

"That makes Emmett . . ."

"Eighty-seven years old, lieutenant."

"Thanks, Harv."

"Well, since you're only going to be there for about three more weeks, I thought I'd better have it already figured out for you."

"Smartass," growled Buckner. "Anything else?"

"Two little wrinkles, lieutenant. Edna's last name might not have been Smith. And she was pregnant."

"She was pregnant?"

"Three to four months, lieutenant."

"And using an alias?"

"Possible, lieutenant. The investigation showed Albany had no record of an Edna Smith."

"Anything else?"

"Nope. It took me most of the morning to get that. Nothing 'deep or elaborate,' you said."

"Good enough, Harv. Thanks, I appreciate it."

"So," said Harv, "any more intriguing developments up there?"

"Well . . ." Buckner considered for a moment. "I've come to one conclusion."

"What's that?"

"There's absolutely no doubt that you're an honest cop, Harv. A cop on the take wouldn't have shoelace hinges on his cabin door and plastic film instead of glass for windows."

"That's a double damn lie, lieutenant!" barked Harv, rising to the tease. "The windows just look like film because they're dirty, and there's only one shoelace, at the top of the door. It was an emergency and I haven't got back there yet to fix it. I think it's a beautiful cabin."

"Well, let's just say it ain't no Porsche, Harv," said Buckner.

A short time later, the August sun was setting, and Buckner sat facing it in a high-backed kitchen chair propped against the side of the cabin.

The murder of Edna Smith was no fiction. Nor was the involvement of Emmett Fox. But to what degree was Emmett involved? Was he the murderer, or the twin brother of the murderer?

On the way back from the woods, he'd examined the nook Emmett had excavated. Barely visible, deep in the darkness covering the surface of the gray log, was an old peckerhole. Buckner tried but couldn't reach far enough to do more than explore the near rim. But it was a distinctive hole, a tear-drop set in a bulbous outline of bark, and wide enough, he estimated, to drop a softball in.

Buckner shifted in his chair, raised the bottle of beer he'd been holding, and paused before taking a swallow. "Two," he said, softly, "three in the thermos, one, then two . . . no, one . . . no, two . . . forget it." He'd lost count.

It was late the next morning when Buckner trudged out to the log pile carrying a crowbar, the maul, and the wedges. He rolled one small log away from the pile and split it into quarters. Then he threw the pieces onto a stack of other split quarters that were too long. Another day, when he had a sizable amount, he'd bring out the chain saw and cut

them into shorter lengths.

The first log was a noise maker. Buckner figured it would bring Emmett shuffling across the road. Picking up the crowbar, he went around to the north side of the pile and began working to free the gray log.

He pried away one obstructing log, and the one above it slid down to fill the void. He struggled with another and found it pinned by two other logs. Stepping back, he moved over about ten feet and forced a severed stump loose. That freed one of the pinning logs, and he shoved it off the pile. Removing that, in turn, freed the other pinning log, and he wrestled that one out of the way. Finally he got to pry loose the log he'd been after in the first place. It took a while, but he managed to free two more and roll them away from the pile. Then he stopped and sat down—the gray log was fully exposed. And off to his left, as if on cue, Emmett Fox was inching his way down the dirt road.

"Morning, Emmett," hailed Buckner as the old man drew closer.

"More like noon," replied Emmett, smiling weakly.

Buckner nodded. "Yeah, well, I'm not going to do much splitting today. Just these here you see around me, and that big gray sucker over there."

"That's an old one, that is," said Emmett quietly. "Soft center. You can see it from here. Insides are rotten. Not your best firewood, son."

"What kind of log is it?" asked Buckner, remembering the unsolicited tutorial he'd received between whittling breaks two days before: Hemlock splits easy but burns too fast for good firewood, son; poplar splits true for a few inches, then takes off around the log; sugar maple splits good and burns good; birch splits straight but hangs together like glue, son.

Emmett rubbed his nose with his thumb. The answer didn't come with the same quick, lively spirit he'd shown before.

"American beech," he said finally.

"I guess I'll start with that American beech then," said Buckner, slowly rising to his feet, "and gradually work my way out to the rest." He motioned to the log he'd been sitting on. "Have a seat, Emmett."

Buckner tapped the first wedge into position near the end of the beech and stepped to the side. Swinging the maul from that angle would be a little awkward, but he wanted to keep an eye on Emmett. The first blow was solid. "I think we're going to have a little

trouble when we get to that peckerhole, don't you, Emmett?" he shouted.

Emmett shrugged.

It took a half dozen more blows to drive the first wedge in. A split, wedge-wide at the top and narrowing to a pencil line, ran down the face of the log. The same split had broken the bark running from the wedge back to the peckerhole. Buckner drove the next wedge into the crack a few inches from the hole. The wood fibers packing the rim of the hole resisted. As the wedge sank deeper, the primary split inched around, fractured into smaller splits, each new one forging ahead just a bit more.

Buckner drove the second wedge home, causing the entire split to widen, freeing up the first wedge. He plucked it out and started hammering it into one of the small fractures in the rim of the hole. Soon the whole right lip of the teardrop was a running stream of fractures, one of which swept down out of the rim and lay pointing toward the back end of the log. Buckner stepped away and picked up his third and last wedge.

He glanced over at Emmett. The old man sat motionless in a little thin huddle, his hands clasped together on his lap. Vacant eyes were fixed on the log.

The grizzled face was slack and drawn. It was not the look of a wiseguy caught in a squeeze: dangerous, calculating, weighing his options. Buckner dismissed the cute remark he'd been about make and went back to the log. Emmett might not have heard him anyway.

The third wedge did the trick. Cracking, snapping, the back end of the log split; the rim of the peckerhole became one big fracture. Buckner worked the wedges free of the rim, then slammed the maul, axe blade first, into the fracture. On the third attempt, the fracture burst apart and the beech lay before him like a half-open, giant clam.

Buckner quickly turned his back on Emmett, not wanting the old man to see the flush of disappointment on his face. It had taken little more than a bare second to see that the depths of the exposed peckerhole held nothing but black, rotten wood fibers, bug holes, and a few hickory nuts.

Had he made a fool of himself? Had he been so cocksure that he'd tipped his hand? Buckner quickly reviewed the last three days. No, probably not. He hadn't really said anything to Emmett that betrayed his suspicions. And he wasn't doing anything unusual. Write it off, he thought.

Buckner turned and threw a passing glance back at Emmett, fully prepared to catch him looking relieved, if not downright smug. But the old man hadn't altered his doleful appearance.

Odd, thought Buckner, looking back at the log. Was there something in there he just hadn't found yet? If that was the case, then, damn it, he'd split the log down into kindling if he had to until he found it.

Dropping into a squat, Buckner braced against the log and shoved, rolling it so the hinged side could be turned over and exposed to the wedges. As the log came slowly around, his fingers slipped into rough grooves in the smooth, gray bark; it lent his final shove a better grip and a quick finish.

Getting back to his feet, he located the crease in the bark that hid the hinge. Suddenly, he cocked his head to the side. The crease ran straight through the old carvings of a teenager in love: EVERETT LOVES EDNA.

"Well, my god," whispered Buckner.

"He was a fool."

Startled, Buckner spun around to see Emmett standing at the foot of the log. Creeping mist again, he thought; but except for the fact that he was standing, the old man's dour

countenance didn't hold a hint of threat.

"Your brother?" asked Buckner, pointing out the names.

"Yes."

"And Edna Smith?"

Emmett's eyes flicked up and passed over Buckner's face. Then he looked back down and nodded. "I guess you're police, too, ain't you, son?"

"Yes," said Buckner.

"It doesn't matter." Emmett slowly walked away from Buckner and went back to the log he'd been sitting on.

Buckner waited a moment, then went over and sat down next to him. "Want a cold beer, Emmett?"

Emmett shook his head. "Not in the mood, son."

Buckner picked up a thin twig and started worrying it with his fingernail. "Tell me, Emmett, what was Edna Smith like?"

"I can hardly recall any more . . . she was a looker, I guess." Emmett sniffed and rubbed his nose, again with the thumb. "Smith wasn't even her real name. The preacher found that out."

"I understand she was pregnant with Everett's child?"

"That," said Emmett, "or the preacher's."

A curve ball, a twist he hadn't expected. Buckner hated them at this stage of the game.

"So your brother wasn't the only one in love with Edna."

"No, nobody else was in love, except Everett. Wouldn't let me cut that tree down and destroy it until after he was dead. By then I was too old to get out there and do the job."

"People must have come across it, now and then."

"Back then, maybe some locals might have seen it. But by the time they did, it didn't matter, we'd already had us an agreement."

"Shunning?"

Emmett nodded.

Buckner sighed—a heavy sigh laden with finality. "Emmett, why did *you* kill Edna Smith?"

Right to the jugular! Buckner knew he was on target before the question had left his mouth. Emmett's whole body tensed. Then it was over. The old man rubbed his hands together and rested them calmly on his bony knees.

"Why did you kill her, Emmett?" said Buckner softly.

"What makes you think I did, son?"

"For one thing, the murder was carried off neatly, almost reverently. A lovesick teenager, in a fit of rage, would have made an ungodly mess out of it." Buckner stopped there and hoped he'd said enough.

Emmett shrugged and looked down at the ground between his feet. "I guess it doesn't matter any more."

"Yeah, I guess," said Buckner, echoing the weary sound in Emmett's voice.

"The preacher convinced me I had to do it," said Emmett. "He came up to me that night looking like he'd been wrestling with the devil. Told me that Everett was running around with an axe, looking to kill the schoolteacher. Said he'd tried to stop him but nearly got attacked himself. Told me how he had been exorcising the demons out of my brother for the past two days, but that Everett had come out of the cleansing like a raging angel. Said Everett was out to destroy that evil witch for sure, and that was all right in God's eyes, but he feared she was too powerful for him. Said only I could save Everett because I was made in his spitting image, and she had no hold over me."

Buckner couldn't bring himself to interrupt. The murder of Edna Smith was taking more twists he hadn't expected; a sad tale from a time of colorless clothes, bowl haircuts, and hidden, isolated valleys where power reigned from a pulpit.

"He told me where she'd be. Gave me a hammer. Then he blessed both me and the ham-

mer, and off I went to do the deed that had to be done, with him swaying back and forth and shouting hallelujahs behind me." Emmett paused. "She was asleep, sitting up at her desk, an open book on her lap. The schoolhouse door wasn't locked." The old man cleared his throat.

"That's the short of it, son," said Emmett, once more running his thumb under his nose. "Times was different back then, I guess."

"Yeah," muttered Buckner, stifling the hint of sarcasm in his voice. "We've come a long way since then."

The cat. The meticulously scrubbed apartment. He, glancing back as the fire escape gave way, seeing the suspect's sick face lighting up with tickled delight. The deranged cultmaster his followers called The High Pretense, in handcuffs, smiling at him as he fell.

Buckner stole a glance at Emmett. He believed the old man had told him the truth. Yet there were still questions that begged for answers. What

had happened to the weapon? Had Everett really run amuck? The policeman in him wanted to know more. About Edna Smith. The pregnancy. The preacher—the policeman inside definitely wanted to know more about the preacher. But he, Joe Buckner, had heard enough. At least for today.

"Well," said Emmett, rising to his feet. "I'll be over to my place tidying up. I'd appreciate it if you let me do that. Won't take long."

Buckner stood. "Wait, Emmett. First of all, I'm out of my jurisdiction up here. And second, you said that old American beech over there won't make good firewood. So why don't we just split it up now, put a match to it, and see if you're right?"

"Pretty warm day to be burning wood, son."

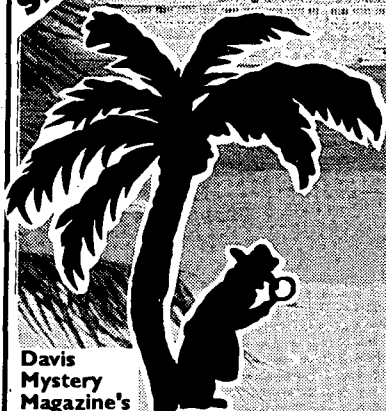
Buckner smiled. "Yeah, warm as hell."

Emmett returned Buckner's smile.

"A sip of that cold beer you offered might take the edge off it."

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"The Game's Afoot, Mon!"



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When God's in Town

by J.A. Paul



When Grandma died, Jenny wasn't sad, though everyone thought she was because she cried. Jenny only cried because Mama cried, though why anyone would cry over losing Grandma, Jenny didn't know. After the funeral the church ladies came and patted Mama's hand. "Lucy," they said, "God knows best. Your mama was old and sickly and didn't enjoy life no more."

That's true, Jenny thought. Grandma yelled and hollered from the day she came to live with them after Jenny's father died. She just turned up on the porch one day saying she could help ease Mama's burden, so in she moved, dragging dusty hats and broken-heeled shoes. After that, everything got louder. The radio, the television, and everybody's voice.

If that wasn't enough, Grandma pestered Mama to ease her burden some more by remarrying. She pestered her so much that Mama believed Will when he sat on the porch saying he could ease her burden by tending the garden. Jenny liked their garden the way it was. It had apple and sour cherry trees and blueberries. Even so, Jenny didn't guess it was Will's primary reason for marrying Mama.

After a while Grandma started saying Will was the most selfish man Mama could of chose. Grandma was right, but Jenny discovered that being right don't mean being happy, because Grandma was purely miserable. If God only just got around to hearing about her, how long would it take Him to hear about Will? Nobody in town yelled more than Will. Nobody worked harder than him, his fruits didn't grow right, his joints hurt, and worst of all, Jenny's bike was always in his way. Those times he yelled first, and threw her bike second. The bike was the last present Jenny had received from her daddy, and she tried her best to protect it. It was hard, since Will wouldn't let her use the garage. Will was a collector of tools and "antique devices," and the garage held shelves and shelves and rows and rows of them, and still not enough to make him happy. Jenny wondered when God might be in town again. Will was sure to be next on His list, if "not enjoyin' life" was what counted. She thought about it for a while. Seeing as how God was the busiest Person alive, she really ought to save Him the work. She should find a way to kill Will herself.

Will liked to bake pies. It was the reason he liked Mama's mature fruit orchard so much. The parlor wall was covered with his plaques and ribbons, though he always grumbled about not getting cash or a collectible. Every weekend, all year long, Jenny and Mama had to taste a new mixture. Given Will's disposition, they always said it was delicious. Jenny still remembered pies flying through the kitchen window before they learned. Worse, Mama had to call somebody else to fix the window, and pay him, too.

But the pies gave Jenny an idea. Two years ago when Grandma was still tasting, Will had mixed a sourful combination of fruits and Grandma had spit it out.

"You tryin' to poison me?" she hollered. Will wouldn't let her taste after that, Grandma didn't want to anyway, but the memory of it gave Jenny her first plan. She'd poison one of Will's pies, and he would die.

When Jenny was small, Mama had taught her about poisonous plants. One of them was called nightshade. Its white droopy flowers made it easy to find, though it wasn't the flowers Jenny wanted. It was the clammy, wilted leaves. One hot afternoon she picked enough to fill a plastic sandwich bag and took them home to the stove. She tried to run the juice from them like Mama did with berries for jelly, but they only burned, so she improvised by boiling them in a little water. It gave her about an ounce of smelly brew, which she poured into a little jar and hid under her bed. She scrubbed everything she had touched and buried the cooked leaves in the back yard. The only thing left was to wait until Saturday morning.

An unbaked crust filled with apples was on the counter. Will faced the other way mixing orange juice with brown sugar. There were peels, rinds, and flour dust all over everything. Saturday mornings were a terrible mess in Mama's kitchen, thought Jenny. Will never cleaned a thing. Jenny took the jar from the pocket of her bathrobe and, quick as a flash, dumped its contents over the uncooked pie. She was sitting on the bottom step of the staircase when Mama came in from bagging the trash, another thing Will never did.

He must've heard the front door shut because right away he yelled to Mama, "Too much juice in these here apples! Didn't I tell you not to pick after a rain? Damn fool women." Mama glanced at Jenny on the step and gave a little shrug. Will picked his own fruit. It was the only thing he did, not trusting their judgment. The exception was at sour cherry time. Since it took him too long to pick what he needed, he made Jenny do it. Neither of them bothered to argue the lie. "Going to need more cornstarch on these here apples," he shouted to them.

This time Jenny was glad for his laziness. Someone else might've started over.

That night after supper Jenny remembered something that was just plain obvious. Will cut three pieces of pie. It was the only thing in his sorry life that he did polite, and she had forgotten it. He served her and Mama first. They were expected to take their bites

before he took his. Jenny watched Mama's fork heading toward her mouth. This was no time to ponder her own poor planning.

"Aaaagh . . . !" Jenny yelled, swinging her milk glass across Mama's plate. Mama dropped her fork in astonishment. Jenny reached over to right her glass and her hand slipped into Mama's pie. Jenny flipped the dish and sent it crashing to the floor. She clutched her stomach. "Oh, I'm sick. I'm real sick!" she declared. If only she could throw up on purpose, the way some of the boys at school could. Instead, she swung her arms to demonstrate the size of her pain and managed to sweep Mama's coffee into the uncut pie in the center of the table. A "pain spasm" caught her as she reached to remove the cup, so she fell on it, pulverizing the remainder of the pastry. "I . . . I have a terrible pain," she said, falling back into her chair, allowing an elbow to land in her own wedge. Quickly surveying the destruction, she decided she couldn't have done much more. There was only one slice of pie left. A sputtering sound came from that end of the table. Will's face was purple and parts of it were pulsating.

"Get that kid outa here!" he roared.

The command was unnecessary, as Mama was already uttering soothing sounds, helping Jenny to her feet. They had reached the landing when Jenny heard a resounding spit. "Woman, where the hell you pick these apples? They taste like pig slop!"

So Will didn't die that night.

Jenny spent the next week thinking. She had almost killed Mama, then saved her. She hoped it was even. She'd have to be a lot more careful next time. She still liked the idea of poison, but she'd have to use a snake or something, placing it where it couldn't possibly get Mama. The most tempting place was the garage, where Will spent so much time admiring his collectibles. The problem was that Will often told Mama to clean the garage. Besides, Jenny didn't like the idea of hunting down a live, poisonous snake.

One day on her way home from school Jenny was kicking pebbles off the sidewalk. She spotted a daddy longlegs and carefully side-stepped it. It gave her an idea.

Later in the day she searched a rocky part of the woods, looking for the tangled web of a black widow spider. After finding it, she sat on a stump to wait. Sure enough, a shiny little black body with the telltale red dots soon appeared. She scooped it into the same

jar used previously for the unsuccessful poisonous leaves and went directly to the one place Mama would be safe and Will would surely get bit. Will's sock drawer. Once Will's socks were washed and put in the drawer, Mama didn't touch them again until they were smelly and dirty and lying on the floor. Jenny picked the blue kind that Will wore every day and emptied the spider into one. She rolled them up the way Mama did and put them back with the rest. All that was left was for Will to die.

Meantime, Mama got a raise from Mr. Cooper's Appliance Store. She was real proud.

"I'm assistant manager now, right under Mr. Bickers," she said at supper.

Jenny began to say how great that was, but Will interrupted.

"How much more money you gettin'?" he asked, with his mouth still full of fried chicken.

"Fifteen dollars a week," said Mama. "And Mr. Cooper said he'd sell us a clothes dryer at cost. We could use the extra money to pay it off. Jenny's a big help hanging the wash, but when it rains . . ."

"Only fifteen dollars?" said Will. "Seems to me; a man gives up the comfort of havin' his wife at home alla the time, seems to me they oughta pay him more for it."

Jenny hoped he'd put on those socks real soon.

It was another two days before she heard the bellow from the bedroom. Mama was cooking breakfast. When she ran upstairs Jenny went with her. Will was standing in his underwear, hair sticking out all over, holding a dead spider.

"How'd this here get in my sock?" he demanded to know.

"What is it?" asked Mama.

"It's a black widow, is what it is. A dead one, lucky for me. What's it coming to when a man can't safely put on a pair of socks?"

"Maybe it crawled in from the clothesline," said Jenny. "If we had a clothes dryer . . ."

"From now on, you insecticide that clothesline, woman. You hear? And check every damn piece of my clothes!"

Time passed, but Jenny had no new ideas.

Then one day there was a talk at school. Jenny learned new information about accidents in the home. The best place was the bathtub, but that was downright unmanageable. Next best was falling downstairs, and that she could manage.

Mama had a big cedar chest along the wall at the top of the

stairs where she kept sheets and blankets. It had little airholes in it that her daddy had put there when Jenny was a baby so that if she ever climbed in she wouldn't suffocate. All Jenny had to do was make a front hole bigger. She did this with one of Will's collectibles, a cordless drill. It was already charged because Will kept everything in the garage charged up even though he never used anything.

One evening when Mama and Will were downstairs, Jenny went up and emptied the cedar chest. She hid the pile of linens under her bed, hoping it wasn't too dusty.

The next morning Mama woke her as usual and went downstairs to make breakfast. While Will was dressing, Jenny hopped into the chest, letting the top close over herself. Mama's longest knitting needle lay waiting. Jenny pushed it into the hole she had enlarged, but not so far out that Will could see it. She waited. The chest was dark and cosy and smelled like the woods. She put her eyes to the other holes. The view wasn't great, but she would be able to see Will's legs approaching. When he got to the landing, she would shove out the needle and trip him down the stairs.

It didn't work quite right. Will moved faster than she expected, and because of it she wound up stabbing him instead of tripping him. He gave a great yowl, and in the end it worked out, for he went hurtling down the stairs just the same. After the thumping and banging stopped, it got quiet. Mama came running, then rushed to the telephone for help. While she was gone, Jenny jumped out of the chest, closed it, and went down to see what had happened. After Mama left with the ambulance, Jenny replaced the linens and needle and squeezed wet dust into the enlarged hole. With hopes high, she went off to school.

Mama wasn't there when Jenny got home, and she didn't take it as a good sign. When somebody died, people stayed home to make funeral plans. Sure enough, she learned that Will was only unconscious. It took another day for him to wake up. The good part was he didn't remember the fall, and nobody noticed the hole in his leg. The bad part, Jenny figured, was that there was no way to kill Will.

Will came home from the hospital full of news about the town fair. Naturally he expected to win the bake contest, but this year there was a new competition he was excited about. It was a three part race, and the prize was a brand new driving mower. At first

Jenny thought it might come in handy to run him over with, but she guessed he would never let her or Mama drive it. She was right. The sound of hammering in the garage proved to be for a special platform to show it off. She and Mama would have to keep pushing the old mower even if Will won ten new ones. That being the case, Jenny vowed to prevent his winning.

It didn't take her long to find she could do nothing with the first two parts of the race. The swim across the creek was in the open where everyone would be watching. The second part was to throw a heavy disc close to a wooded path. The closer they got, the shorter and easier would be the third part, which was a blindfolded race through the woods to a clearing on the other side of the trees. Jenny liked the third part. If they were all blindfolded, it should be easy to stall Will.

Jenny spent the next week walking the wooded area looking for vines, which she tied together. She studied the path toward which they'd be throwing their discs. She made allowances for short throws, long throws, and the distance a blindfolded person might go astray. Then she laid the vine, tying one end to a tree and placing the remainder across and beyond the path. She would've used rope but thought it might be discovered before the race. The vine had a better chance of lying unnoticed, it being as natural to woods as squirrels. She carried the rest of it to the bottom of a strong tree, put a rock on it, and climbed up the tree holding on to the last ten feet of vine. This she wrapped loosely around a thick limb she would use as a perch on Fair Day. When she climbed down to remove the rock, the vine remained flat. Jenny covered the length of it with leaves, climbed back to her perch, and gave a tug. The leaves heaved slightly. It was ready to trip Will.

Everybody was in a good mood on Fair Day, especially Will, who laid claim to the blue ribbon in the pie contest as well as the big new mower.

Jenny ate popcorn, hot dogs, and cotton candy. She listened to the tinny fair music, went on a few rides with her friends, and slipped away in between to check her vine. Mama was selling chances on somebody's hand-made quilt, and Jenny saw Mr. Bickers stop to buy another ticket over and over instead of buying them all at once. Jenny grimaced. Mr. Bickers was married. When the afternoon was at its warmest, an announcement came to shut down the rides and lock up the booths. The race was on.

Up in the cool branches of her tree, Jenny couldn't see the swim

part at all, and only saw a couple of the discs land. Either Will's swim was slow or his throw short, for he wasn't among the leaders. That would've made Jenny happy except that those ahead of him went so far astray she couldn't believe it. Some were walking the length of the woods instead of through it. Others moved too fast for being blindfolded, and either walked into trees or tripped and fell. By the time they got up, their sense of direction was gone. Some even went backwards to where they started, and had to begin all over again.

If just one of them could get to the other side, Jenny thought, the race would be over. How could it be that hard? She got so wrapped up in the cursing and shouting she almost missed Will. He was directly below her when she saw him and yanked the vine. His foot must've been on top of it because the vine didn't move, but the pressure exerted from her pulling at it caused her perch to crack. Quickly she grabbed a branch above her and swung her legs over it. Her original perch crashed to the ground, and she figured it must've been wormy. If she'd known before, she could've dropped it on his head. Below her, Will was using swear words that turned her ears red. Lucky for her, the tree was in full leaf in case a spotter came to check on him, or heaven help her, he should take his blindfold off and look up.

"What in hell you boys doin', makin' this here race under rotten timber! M'damn shoulder's dislocated!" he yelled. Jokes came back, and he cursed some more. Jenny wondered what made him think of rotten wood right off. She peeked through the leaves. Sure enough, his blindfold was askew. Good, thought Jenny. Now he'll have to forfeit. Her mouth dropped when she saw him glance around for spotters and, seeing none, replace his blindfold. The cheat, Jenny thought. He had seen the path and was heading straight for it. In a little while a whistle blew. Will had won.

Jenny went home early to clean herself up before Mama saw her so scratched and dirty. Afterwards, she sat alone on the porch, watching night fall and the lights of the fair flicker out. Pretty soon she heard a little parade coming down the street. Driving his new mower despite one arm in a sling, Will led the procession. Behind him, Mama was laughing and talking in a group that included Mr. Bickers. Mr. Bickers was holding the quilt Mama had sold the chances on. If there was doubt in Jenny's mind about Will's new mower, it was dispelled when someone asked if he would finally mow the lawn himself.

"And dirty this here?" said Will. "This here is both the maiden and farewell voyage of my latest collectible, which I'm gonna call Big Red. This here is my crownin' achievement. He's goin' to sit in a rightful place of honor in the center of m'other honorable collectibles."

He wore an extra ribbon on his chest, Jenny noticed. He'd won the pie contest, too.

As they arrived, Jenny went to sit under the maple tree not far from the garage. Her bike was there. It would start to rust any day now. Mr. Cooper opened the garage door. It was he who had donated the machine. "Will, those mowers aren't collectibles," he said. "They're pieces of equipment meant to make life easier."

"My life's easy enough," said Will as he drove up on the little platform and shifted gears. The mower lurched and kept going. It went over the far side and jolted Will into the overladen shelves at the rear. Down came old and new vises, chain saws, mallets, wheel trollies, and blacksmithing equipment. They learned later that it was a brand new, never used vise that hit him first.

Jenny remained under the maple tree. She heard the din. When the crashing stopped, she saw men run into the garage. She saw Mr. Bickers' arm go around Mama. She waited while the doctor and ambulance were summoned. She watched the doctor shake his head, and she saw Mama faint. A group of men were cleaning up the mess. There would soon be room for Jenny's bike. She wheeled it toward the garage, then stopped to kick the stand into place. She returned to the maple tree and peered up into its dark, whispering branches. God was back in town, and he was here, she was sure of it.

"I guess you just told me that in some things it's not my place to interfere," she whispered. She looked back over to where Mr. Bickers was wrapping his quilt around Mama. "But next time somebody climbs the porch to ease Mama's burden, would it be okay if I slam the door in his face?"

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

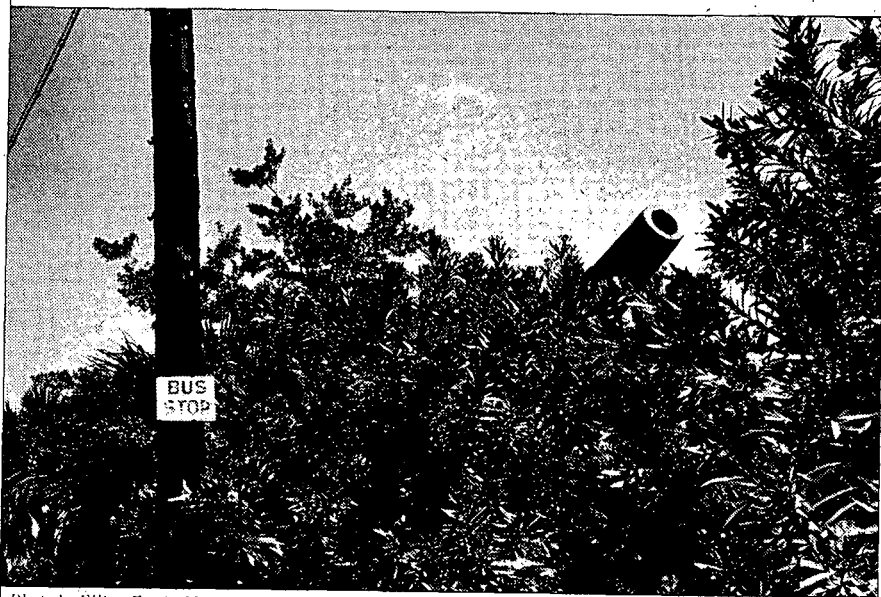
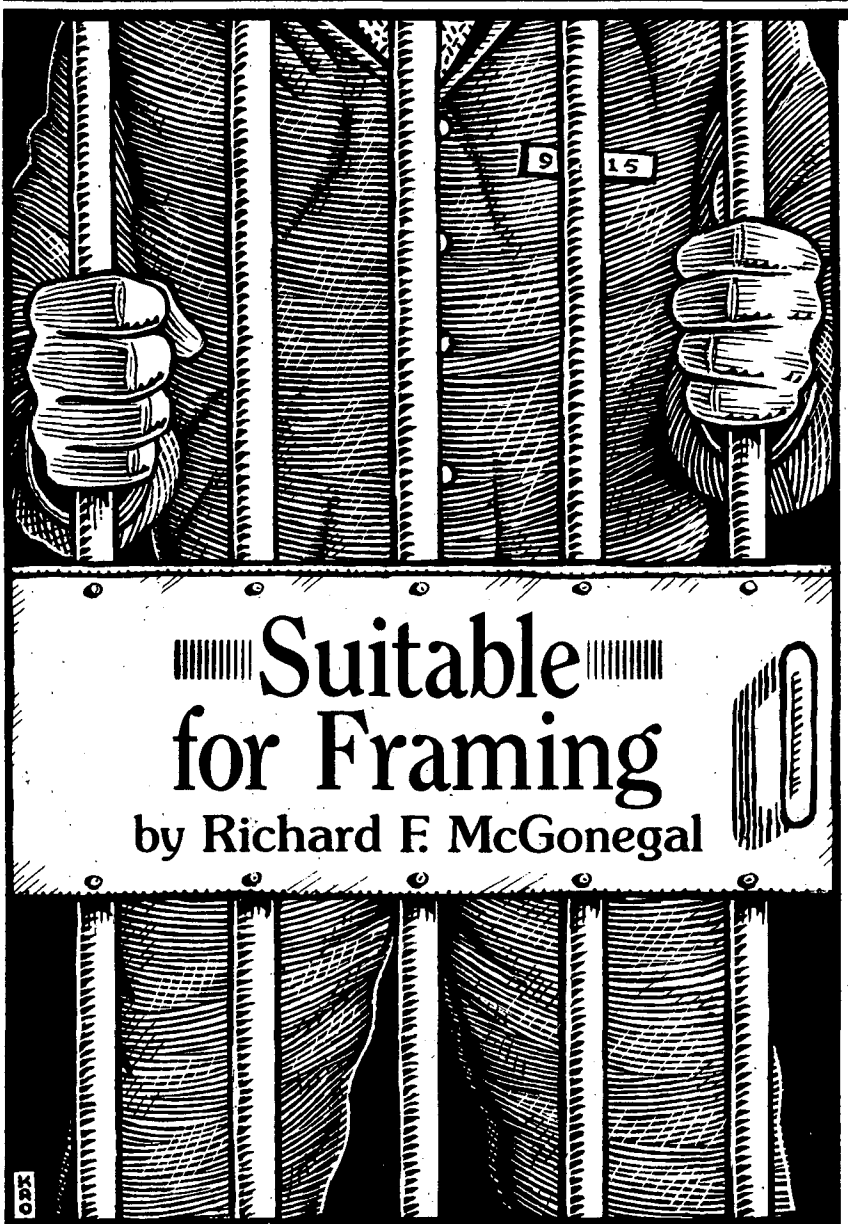


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The *exact* fare, please. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



Suitable for Framing

by Richard F. McGonegal

Sheriff Francis Hood hated loose ends.

He straightened the stack of documents lying on an open manila folder in the center of his massive oak desk, then placed his copy of the indictment on top of the pile.

His almost perpetual smile, however, was nowhere in evidence, nor did he close the folder with the usual flourish of finality that brought such satisfaction when an investigation yielded an indictment. Instead, he simply stared.

"Congratulations."

Hood looked up. His chief deputy, Gus "Wally" Wallendorf, stood in the open doorway to Hood's office.

The sheriff's quick nod signaled acknowledgement rather than appreciation.

"The prosecutor's office has scheduled a press conference for two o'clock," Wally said. "Pancrazio wants to know if you'll be there."

Hood pondered a moment; he also hated press conferences. "Yeah," he replied, reluctantly. "Tell 'em I'll be there."

"Gotcha," Wally said. "I'm goin' over to Millie's for some lunch after I make the call. Wanna go?"

"No, thanks," Hood replied.

Wally turned away, then turned back and stepped inside the office. "Somethin' wrong?"

The sheriff's quizzical squint answered the question. His brows arched, his nose wrinkled, and his mouth bypassed a smile and settled on a grimace. He motioned for Wally to sit. "You think Jimmy Kronk is guilty?" Hood asked.

"Are you kidding?" Wally replied, without hesitation. "He's a two-time loser. He had motive, he had opportunity, and he had the damned murder weapon in his car. This case is a prosecutor's dream. I'll bet Pancrazio will dredge up every cliché in the book at the press conference—open-and-shut, airtight, lead-pipe cinch."

Hood remained silent a moment. "I'm not asking if you'd convict him. I'm asking if you think he did it."

The unmistakable gravity in Hood's tone forced Wally to reconsider. "You got somethin'?" he asked. "Somethin' that doesn't add up?"

"Not exactly," Hood confessed.

Wally studied his boss momentarily. "What then?"

Hood combed his stubby fingers through his close-cropped sandy hair. "It's almost too right, too open-and-shut, too airtight."

"So?" Wally said.

"So," Hood replied. "The perfect investigation is like the perfect crime—it just doesn't

happen. There's always something missing, some loose ends." Hood spread his hands above the stack of documents. "There're no loose ends here."

As Wally pondered, Hood read his deputy's changing expression as the germination of the seeds of doubt he had planted.

"You think he's innocent?" Wally asked.

"I don't know," Hood said, softly. "Most criminals claim they're innocent. Kronk's no different. What makes him different is he's not stupid. If he did it, I just don't see him leaving so much evidence that points directly to him."

"You think he's on the level about bein' framed?" Wally asked. His voice had quieted to match Hood's, like co-conspirators whispering their secrets.

"I don't know," Hood repeated. "Kronk won't talk to me, except to say, 'I've been framed,' or 'I wanna talk to my lawyer.'" Hood paused and reflected on his interrogation sessions with Kronk. Despite Kronk's seemingly cool exterior, Hood had felt the heat—an intense amalgam of hatred and desired vengeance—emanating from his captive. "One thing I do know," Hood added, "he hasn't forgotten the three-year stretch he pulled on my account."

"But you busted him, what, ten or twelve years ago?" Wally asked.

"Fourteen," Hood corrected.

"Personally, I like the idea of keepin' him behind bars," Wally said, "but I get the feelin' you want to reopen the investigation."

"I haven't closed it yet," Hood said, gesturing toward the open folder. "For now, though, let's just keep it between you and me. Keep your eyes and ears open, see if we pick up anything."

"Okay," Wally said. He pressed his sinewy hands on the oak chair arms and lifted his lanky frame.

Hood watched his deputy leave. He glanced down at the documents and was struck by a singular irony—he finally had a case with none of the dreaded loose ends, and now he was trying to find some.

Prosecutor Leo Pan-
crazio possessed the poise and professionalism of a network news anchor. His hair was well groomed, his suit unrumpled, and his tie neatly knotted. He sat beside Hood at the rectangular Formica-topped table while reporters and photographers busily illuminated portable lights, loaded videotape, and flipped notepads.

"I'd like to begin with a brief statement," Pancrazio announced, "then I'll be happy to take your questions."

The prosecutor waited patiently while the journalists made final adjustments, then settled like a gaggle of geese—still, yet alert.

"The county grand jury this morning indicted James A. Kronk, age thirty-eight, on a charge of first-degree murder for the shooting death of Vaughn Gilday, age thirty-five," Pancrazio said. "The victim was killed on or about September second. The cause of death was a single gunshot wound to the head from a .38 caliber handgun. The weapon allegedly used in the homicide has been recovered. Kronk is being held in the county jail in lieu of one hundred thousand dollars' bond. He is scheduled to appear in court September twentieth to enter a plea. Kronk previously has served sentences for two armed robberies, one from this county in 1976 and another from St. Louis in 1982."

Pancrazio paused, and Hood wondered—since he knew what would come next—if it was intended as a dramatic pause.

"As you know," Pancrazio continued, "first-degree murder is a capital offense. Our office fully intends to seek the

death penalty in this case."

He stopped reading, laid his papers on the table, and turned toward Hood. "I also would like to thank Sheriff Hood and his department for their excellent investigative work in this case. Without their diligent efforts, we would not be here today."

Pancrazio nodded appreciatively at the sheriff, then faced the assembly. "Now, if there are any questions."

Hood listened as Pancrazio deftly dodged the reporters' queries. In answer to each, the prosecutor recited facts already disclosed, then finished with the refrain: "I regret I am not at liberty to discuss the evidence in the case."

The sheriff was impressed. Despite the grilling, Pancrazio seemed to bask in the glow of the camera lights. Hood knew the prosecutor had aspirations, not the least of which was to be elected Missouri attorney general. Pancrazio once had confessed to Hood that he had fled his hometown of Kansas City, and the lucrative opportunity to serve as counsel for his uncle's extensive distributorship, because voters were not likely to entrust the integrity of the state's high office to a metropolitan lawyer named Leonardo Vincenzo Pancrazio who worked for his family's business.

Hood generally abhorred politicians—although he himself had to seek re-election every four years—but he genuinely liked Pancrazio. Behind the prosecutor's flamboyant style lurked substance. Pancrazio thrived in the courtroom; he enjoyed trying cases, and he detested plea bargains. Although Pancrazio remained mindful of his win-loss record, he listened to law enforcement officers—if they wanted a criminal off the streets, he made his best case.

"Sheriff."

Hood yanked himself from his reverie and faced the reporter who had shouted.

"Is it true that Kronk is also a suspect in the armed robbery at the Interparish Auxiliary Art Auction?"

Hood hated being evasive. He glanced momentarily at Pancrazio, then—following the prosecutor's lead—said: "I'm not at liberty to comment on that."

"Sheriff," the reporter persisted, "witnesses have said the robbers wore devil masks. Given that the robbery remains unsolved, can you comment on public speculation that there is a cult in the area and that the robbers were satanists?"

Hood pondered a moment. "I think it's fair to say they weren't good Catholics," he said.

Amid the chuckling, Hood noticed Pancrazio's stony silence and, in the periphery of his vision, he caught the prosecutor's cold stare. The colorful comment, Hood realized instantly, was a mistake. The image of a sitting duck in a sheriff's uniform flashed in his mind as journalists strafed him with questions.

He really hated press conferences.

The press conference, Hood considered as he fled down the courthouse steps to his basement office, had been orchestrated to benefit Pancrazio, not the media. The prosecutor would be featured on nightly newscasts and on the front page of the morning newspaper, while the journalists would be forced to scrape together a skeletal story that failed to satiate the public appetite for gory details.

Hood had witnessed those details up close. Perhaps, he thought, if the prosecutor, the press, or the public had stared into Vaughn Gilday's lifeless eyes, they would comprehend the unappetizing reality of the sight.

Hood secluded himself in his office and slumped into his chair. He was angry. He was angered by the tendrils of mor-

bid showmanship and ignorant speculation attached to the case, but mostly, he knew, he was angry with himself.

Vaughn Gilday had been a punk, a small fry who tried to swim with sharks. Hood had caught him and used him to attract a bigger catch, but had failed to reel him in quickly enough. Gilday had been devoured, and Hood could not shake the grim feeling of responsibility.

Hood hadn't anticipated a death, not as a consequence of an armed robbery investigation that had become a frustrating, month-long fishing expedition.

The armed robbery occurred on the evening of July twenty-eighth, when two men wearing devil masks—each wielding a handgun and carrying a large canvas bag—interrupted the Interparish Auxiliary's annual benefit art auction being conducted in the auditorium of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church. The patrons—including many prosperous merchants and their spouses—were instructed to put wallets, purses, wristwatches, rings, and necklaces into the bags. In the absence of resistance or heroism, the bags were filled, and the gunmen fled within minutes.

Hood's probe of the incident started slowly and rapidly dete-

riorated. Consensus descriptions from witnesses portrayed the gunmen as medium build, with no distinguishing characteristics. Hood distributed a list of the stolen items to agencies statewide via the Missouri Uniform Law Enforcement System and, in the absence of further leads, fielded constituents' telephone calls, which ranged from concerned to irate.

The first break in the case came on August thirtieth when Wally received a call from a Kansas City detective he had met during a training conference. The detective, Tom McGrail, had raided a reputed fencing operation and had arrested a suspect named Michael Canone. McGrail reported that some of the items seized in the raid matched the description of jewelry stolen during the Interparish Auxiliary auction. He also reported that an address book found at the scene included the name and telephone number of one Central Missourian, Vaughn Gilday.

Wally relayed the information to his boss and was instructed to bring Gilday in for questioning.

Hood crammed for the examination. Based on Gilday's meager arrest record—all misdemeanors—Hood suspected Gilday had been an intermediary.

Shortly after seating himself across from Gilday in the interrogation room, however, the sheriff abandoned his preconception. The almost palpable fear emanating from Gilday convinced Hood that his suspect had graduated from misdemeanor to felony and that he dreaded the idea of serving time in prison.

Seizing his advantage, Hood played Gilday like a well-hooked fish. Pancrazio and an assistant public defender who previously had represented Gilday were summoned and, when the marathon negotiations were concluded, Hood turned Gilday loose—as bait. In exchange for a plea of guilty to accessory and a recommendation for probation, Gilday had agreed to lure a trophy—the mastermind as well as the other participant in the armed robbery, Jimmy Kronk.

Gilday's task was to arrange a meeting within ten days for an undercover officer to buy stolen jewelry from Kronk. The call never came; instead, Hood received a very different communication.

On Wednesday morning, September fifth—six days after the pact with Gilday was struck—Wally appeared in the doorway to Hood's office and announced unceremoniously: "I think Gilday took a powder."

Hood's attention compacted into an expression that begged for details.

"We just got a call from a woman named Alma Linnenbrink who shares a duplex with Gilday in Forest Lake subdivision. She says she hasn't seen him for a couple days and . . ."

Hood sprang from his chair and headed for the door; Wally followed, leaving his unfinished sentence in the vacant office.

They arrived at the subdivision within minutes, and as they left the cruiser and approached Gilday's duplex, an elderly woman emerged from the adjoining apartment.

"Thank God you've come," she said, hobbling toward them with the aid of a chrome-plated walker. "I'm Alma Linnenbrink, the one who called. I wouldn't have bothered you except . . . well, it's not like Vaughn . . . I mean, usually if he's going to be gone he lets me know because . . ."

"Wait right here while we check this out, ma'am," Wally interrupted.

She continued to prattle, but not to advance, as Hood and Wally went to Gilday's door and knocked. While they awaited an answer, Hood picked up a faint odor—a sickening scent he knew only too well.

He exchanged a look with Wally which indicated his deputy also had sensed the aroma of death. They tried the front door and found it locked. While Wally guarded the front, Hood slipped around the building and found an unlocked side door that opened onto the kitchen.

Drawing the 9mm automatic from his holster, Hood swung the door open, waited a moment, then peered cautiously inside. Gilday's body was sprawled on the kitchen linoleum, his legs draped over a toppled chair and his head lying in a congealed puddle of blood that had flowed from a single hole in his forehead. He was clad in a pale blue T-shirt, khaki shorts, white socks, and tennis shoes.

The stench, akin to pounds of spoiled meat, assaulted Hood's nostrils and exploded in the pit of his stomach. He fought the dual urges to retch and retreat, instead keeping his eyes focused on the hallway leading from the kitchen.

Although experience pronounced that the victim had been dead for days and reason reminded him that the killer was long gone, Hood felt the burst of adrenaline and the rapid thump of his heart against his rib cage.

He lifted the walkie-talkie

from his belt. "Wally," he said, "take Mrs. Linnenbrink to the cruiser and call for backup and forensics, then cover the front door. I'm going inside, but if anything comes through the front door, it won't be me."

"Gotcha," Wally said. "I'll let you know when I'm in position."

Hood awaited confirmation from Wally, then inched into the kitchen—eyes wide, ears alert, handgun leveled in outstretched hands. He toured the interior of the apartment quickly but cautiously. He found nothing.

"No one here except the victim," Hood advised Wally via the walkie-talkie.

"Back-up unit just arrived," Wally said.

"Keep 'em outside, but send forensics to the side door as soon as they get here."

"Gotcha," Wally said.

Hood returned to the kitchen and slowly surveyed the scene. On the Formica dinette table were an ashtray with three cigarette butts, an open pack of cigarettes and a disposable lighter, a glass of probably rancid orange juice, and a Sunday newspaper, spread to the baseball box scores in the sports section. All were blood-spattered.

Hood scanned the floor for a gun. He saw none.

"Phew."

He snapped toward the sound.

Dr. Loeffelman, the county medical examiner, stood at the side door. "Smells like something died in here," Loeffelman said. He entered, knelt beside the body, and examined the wound. "Nasty," he whispered.

"I'm going to look around some more," Hood said. "Be right back."

Hood retraced his way through the rooms, not with the urgency of seeking a cloistered killer but with the deliberation of identifying evidence. No signs of ransacking, struggle, or forced entry were apparent.

When he returned to the kitchen, he found the forensics team from the state highway patrol had arrived and were dusting busily for fingerprints. Loeffelman remained where Hood had left him, kneeling beside the victim.

Hood stooped and peered over his shoulder. "What can you tell me?" he asked.

"He's dead, all right," Loeffelman deadpanned.

Hood grimaced. Despite working dozens of cases with Loeffelman—from accidents to suicides to homicides—he never had gotten accustomed to the medical examiner's corpse-side manner.

"How long?" Hood asked.

"It'll be ballpark."

"Get in the ballpark now. You can throw for the strike zone later."

"Three or four days," Loeffelman replied. "But don't get your hopes up on time of death," he cautioned. "I won't be able to get too precise this long after the fact."

Hood relinquished the scene to forensics and headed outdoors, where Wally was busy keeping Mrs. Linnenbrink and an ever-gathering crowd of on-lookers at bay.

The sheriff motioned for Wally and, together, the two men walked a discreet distance from the throng. "Find someplace quiet to take her statement," Hood said, gesturing with his thumb toward Mrs. Linnenbrink. "Take your time and get as much detail as possible. I'll meet you back here as soon as I can."

"Where you headed?" Wally asked.

"To see a judge about a search warrant."

An hour later, Hood swung the cruiser into the subdivision parking lot and stopped at the curb. Wally climbed in the passenger side.

"Get the warrant?" Wally asked.

Hood nodded. "Pancrazio helped," he said. He extracted

the folded paper from his shirt pocket, handed it to Wally, and drove from the lot. "Radio two units for backup," Hood said. "The address is on there."

Wally unfolded the document and quickly scanned its contents. The warrant authorized a search of Kronk's residence and vehicle for any valuables stolen from the auction participants, any mask or handgun possibly used in the robbery, or any gun possibly used in Gilday's murder.

After Wally dispatched the radio message, Hood asked, "Forensics turn up anything?"

"Zero," Wally replied. "No gun, it definitely wasn't suicide. No forced entry, so it was probably somebody he knew. They're still liftin' prints."

Hood steered the cruiser onto U.S. 50 and headed east. "Get anything from the neighbor?" he asked.

"Mostly I learned about her arthritis and her wicked daughters-in-law, who don't like to visit and want to put her in a nursing home."

Hood smiled.

Wally procured his notebook and flipped some pages. "The last time she saw Gilday was Saturday when he brought her mail. She said he always did that so she wouldn't have to walk to the mailbox." Wally looked up from the pad. "All the

mailboxes are in a cluster by the entrance," he digressed. "It would be quite a trip for her with that walker."

"I noticed," Hood said. "So she saw him last on Saturday."

"Right," Wally replied, returning to his notes. "She said she didn't hear any sounds from his apartment Sunday or Monday and she noticed his car was still parked in the lot, but she figured he had gone with some friends on a Labor Day outing. She said she didn't start gettin' worried till Tuesday, when he didn't bring the mail. She said he always let her know if he was gonna be gone for an extended time, especially if there was mail delivery. She said when he didn't bring any mail again today, she decided to call us."

"You check his mailbox?"

"His and hers both. They both had mail. He gets the paper, too, in a separate box below his mailbox. Tuesday's and today's were both in his box."

"Make a note to call the newspaper office to see what time the paper is delivered. It might help us establish time of death."

"Already called," Wally said. "It's a kid who delivers the papers, but I gotta go through the route driver who brings the bundles to the kids. I left a message for him to call me. I also

checked to see if they published Monday. They didn't."

"Good," Hood said. He glanced at Wally, with a faint smile of admiration for his deputy's thoroughness. "What about sounds? She said she didn't hear anything from Gilday's apartment Sunday or Monday, but what about after he delivered mail Saturday—stereo, TV, running water?"

"She said she heard the shower runnin' Saturday night when she was gettin' ready for bed, between ten and eleven. That's it."

"What about anything that could have been a gunshot—firecrackers, a car back-firing?"

"I asked," Wally said. "She said no."

"Anything else?"

"Not unless you want to hear more about the arthritis and the daughters-in-law."

"I'll pass," Hood said.

They sat silently as Hood continued eastbound on U.S. 50. Beyond the eastern city limits, two other department cruisers fell in line and followed. The convoy turned south on Sawmill Road and weaved through a wooded area that led to a massive clearing forested with apartment buildings, some completed, others sprouting like seedlings from the barren earth.

"This Kronk's place?" Wally asked as Hood angled into the curb.

"Yeah," Hood affirmed. He and Wally got out, as did the other deputies. The six men huddled quickly.

"Twenty-two-C," Hood said. "Second floor, right. Wally and Lester and I will take the front. Two of you take the back, and one watch the balcony. If you have to shoot him, try not to kill him."

Hood knocked and identified himself; Kronk opened the door.

"What's this all about?" Kronk asked. He seemed neither surprised nor concerned.

"I have a warrant to search the premises," Hood said.

"Let's see it," Kronk said.

Hood handed him the document. Kronk scanned it, then swung the door open. "C'mon in," he said.

Hood entered and stood near the door frame while his deputies passed and began their search. Kronk pulled a kitchen chair from the table and straddled it, his chest leaning against the backrest. He neither interfered nor spoke.

The deputies found nothing incriminating in the apartment. In the glovebox of Kronk's unlocked car, however, Wally found a .38 caliber handgun with five bullets in its six-

shot cylinder. The gun, placed in a plastic bag by the deputy, was handed to the sheriff.

"Wanna tell me about this?" Hood asked, dangling the bag in front of Kronk.

Kronk shrugged. "Beats me," he answered. "Unless Barney Fife there planted it."

"You're under arrest, Jimmy," Hood said. He turned to his disparaged deputy. "He's all yours, Wally. Cuff him and read him his rights."

Although the pristine interior of the prosecutor's office did not lend itself to distractions, Hood's gaze wandered among the accoutrements.

"I need to review the evidence and your testimony," Pancrazio said, leaning forward in an attempt to seize the sheriff's attention. "I don't want any surprises in the courtroom."

Seven weeks had elapsed since the press conference; Kronk's trial was scheduled to begin in as many days—the following Monday. Although Hood had failed to shake the sensation that something was awry, he had found no evidence to support his suspicion.

"We've got a strong case," Pancrazio contended, as if in answer to an unspoken challenge.

"Circumstantial," Hood countered, nearly a whisper.

"Granted," Pancrazio said. "No eyewitnesses, no confession. But we've got motive, opportunity, and means."

"I'm going to rely on your testimony about the interrogation of Gilday to establish motive," the prosecutor continued. "We need to convey to the jury that Gilday had agreed to set up Kronk for a bust. We can't prove Kronk found out about the deal, but we can sure create a strong impression that he did. For that, I'm going to rely on the neighbor, Mrs. Linnenbrink, who identified Kronk as a visitor to Gilday's apartment on Friday night, less than two days before the murder. I also can bring in Sandra from the crime lab to testify about Kronk's fingerprints' being found on the seat back of the chair in Gilday's kitchen."

Hood nodded. "Too bad we can't prove the fingerprints were left Sunday rather than Friday."

"Yeah," Pancrazio agreed. "It's also too bad we can't put Kronk at the scene, but—in the absence of an alibi—he can't put himself elsewhere." He paused. "We've established the time of death between six A.M. and ten A.M. Sunday. Both the paperboy and his father, who drove his son that Sunday, will

testify they put the Sunday newspaper in Gilday's box at approximately six A.M. You'll testify that you found the Sunday newspaper on the kitchen table when you discovered the body, and Loeffelman will testify that Gilday was dead at least seventy-two hours from the time you found him.

"In my closing," Pancrazio continued, "I'll create the scenario that Kronk arrived at Gilday's duplex sometime after six A.M., talked with Gilday while he was reading the baseball scores, then shot him in the head."

Again Hood nodded. The evidence, as outlined by Pancrazio, began to sound progressively more convincing.

"As to means, you'll testify about finding the gun in Kronk's car, and Sandra will state, without equivocation, that the bullet that killed Gilday was fired from that gun."

Hood wrinkled his expression into a grimace.

"What?" Pancrazio asked.

"The gun bothers me. It's cold, and there were no fingerprints on it."

"So," Pancrazio argued. "It stands to reason he would use a gun that couldn't be traced. After the killing, he wiped it clean."

"Why didn't he get rid of it?"

"That's not at issue."

"It is to me," Hood said, his tone quiet rather than confrontational. "Keeping a murder weapon in your glovebox is stupid; and Kronk's not stupid."

"He's been caught twice—make that three times."

"He's not stupid," Hood repeated. "His car was unlocked. So was the glovebox. What if his attorney argues someone else put the gun in Kronk's car to frame him?"

"Who?" Pancrazio asked.

"I don't know," Hood replied. He realized that whenever he discussed the case, he frequently echoed the refrain: "I don't know."

The sheriff snatched the telephone receiver, interrupting the second ring. "Hood," he said, with characteristic terseness.

"We've got a problem," Pancrazio said. His tone betrayed subdued panic. "We need to talk right away."

"Want me to come up?"

"I'll come down," Pancrazio answered.

When Pancrazio hurried into Hood's office, Wally already was seated in one of the well-worn oak chairs that faced the sheriff's desk. Pancrazio halted and stared disapprovingly at Wally, but said nothing.

Hood was aware of the enmity between the prosecutor

and his chief deputy. Although both maintained a perfunctory professionalism in their dealings with each other, Wally considered the prosecutor a glitzy glory-boy, and Pancrazio thought of the chief deputy as a backwoods bumpkin.

"I've asked Wally to sit in," Hood said, with non-negotiable authority. "I've been relying on him a lot in this investigation."

Pancrazio dragged one of the empty chairs a distance from Wally, sat down, and faced Hood. "Kronk has an alibi," the prosecutor said without preamble.

Hood stared momentarily. "You sure?" he asked.

"Positive," Pancrazio answered solemnly. "We got a revised list of witnesses from Kronk's lawyer. They're planning an alibi defense."

Hood was no attorney, but he had absorbed a rudimentary knowledge of the law through professional osmosis. Although he could not cite chapter and verse in the statutes, he knew any alibi defense must be disclosed to the prosecution through a pre-trial process called discovery.

"What alibi?" Hood asked.

"Kronk was on a half-day fishing excursion at the lake from six A.M. until one P.M. on the Sunday Gilday was killed. He's got four witnesses to con-

firm it—the captain of the fishing boat, an oldtimer who goes out every weekend, and a father and son who were on vacation from Illinois. They're all solid folks, and they all check out. Figure at least an hour of travel time from here to the lake, and Kronk is accounted for from at least five A.M. until two P.M."

"You doublecheck with Loeffelman?" Hood asked. "Maybe Gilday was killed later."

"Loeffelman says no chance. He says Gilday was dead at least seventy-two hours, probably longer, from the time you found the body at ten A.M. Wednesday."

"What about the paperboy? Could he have been off on the delivery time?"

"Both he and his father swear it was right around six A.M.," Pancrazio replied. "The apartment complex is the last stop on their route."

Hood pondered; Pancrazio waited.

"Any ideas?" the sheriff asked Wally.

"No," Wally answered without hesitation.

Hood felt something troubling in the quickness of his deputy's response.

"Why didn't Kronk say he had an alibi?" Pancrazio asked, as if wondering aloud.

"I don't know," Hood replied

That phrase again, he thought. The office suddenly seemed awash in confusion.

"Can you talk to him?" Pancrazio asked.

"I've tried. He won't talk to me," Hood said. As an afterthought, he explained: "He still hates my guts for putting him away back in '76."

"I don't get it," Pancrazio mused. "A guy's got an alibi, and he's willing to cool his heels in jail for a couple of months awaiting trial."

The trio sat silently for a time.

"I knew he was hiding something," Hood said softly. "I knew this case came together too easily."

"Well, it's coming apart now," Pancrazio countered. "Trial is scheduled to start in a couple days, and the accused has an airtight alibi. I'm gonna have to dismiss the charges. In the meantime, you're gonna have to find out who framed Kronk."

"Not so fast," Hood said.

"What do you mean?" Pancrazio challenged. "I can't get a conviction in the face of this evidence. This case just went down the tubes."

"Get a continuance," Hood suggested.

"Are you kidding?" the prosecutor replied. "I can't get a continuance because they've got

better evidence. Kronk's attorney hasn't stalled at all—no motions for a change of venue, change of judge, nothing. I'll get tossed out of court on my ear if I bring a motion for a continuance."

Hood contemplated. He decided to appeal to Pancrazio's ambition. "You just said we don't have another suspect. If you kick Jimmy Kronk loose now, you're gonna have a public relations nightmare on your hands. The press will be talking about the killer on the loose, then rerunning the tape from the press conference when you announced with certainty that Jimmy Kronk was..."

"So what do you suggest?" Pancrazio interrupted.

"We've got until Monday. Give Wally and me some time to go over the case. Maybe we were looking so hard at Jimmy Kronk, we passed over something important, something that pointed to someone else."

"The longer we wait, the worse it's going to look when we finally do dismiss," Pancrazio lamented.

"Just give us some time," Hood said. "I know there's something we just haven't been able to latch onto yet. I feel it in my bones."

"How much time?"

"Enough," Hood answered.

* * *

Hood let himself into the jail cell, locked the door behind him, and leaned his broad back against the bars.

"How come you won't talk to me, Jimmy?"

Kronk slouched on his bunk. "Just shy, I guess, sheriff."

"You could've saved yourself a lot of jail time if you'd told me about the fishing trip."

Kronk's momentary expression—like a deer snapping to alert at the sound of a breaking twig—confirmed that he deliberately had kept the alibi secret, but revealed no clue as to why. "You here to cut me loose?" Kronk asked.

Hood shook his head. "Not just yet. I wanna know why a guy with an alibi doesn't get himself off the hook right from the start."

"I told you I was framed," Kronk said. "You didn't believe me."

"You didn't tell me about the alibi."

"You didn't ask if I'd gone fishin'. Besides, you wouldn't have believed that either."

"I could've checked it out."

"I'm the one who's gonna be checkin' out," Kronk said. He sat upright and stared, his mouth twisting into a malevolent smile. "It's payback time, sheriff. I did a three-year stretch, thanks to you, but now I'm gonna have the last laugh.

Whether you drop the charges or I get acquitted, it's all the same. You got your big butt hangin' over a limb, and I'm holdin' the saw." He paused. "Don't think I ain't enjoyin' this."

Hood met Kronk's sadistic stare. "Who killed Gilday?" he asked.

"You come to the wrong place for help, sheriff. I'm done talkin', I'm ready to start walkin'."

Hood let himself out, slamming the cell door behind him in a show of rage. He stormed down the corridor and, when he was well beyond Kronk's sight, he slowed his pace and smiled.

“G et anything out of Kronk?” Wally asked from the open doorway to Hood's office.

The sheriff's residual smile answered the question. He motioned for Wally to enter. "I found out why he kept quiet about the alibi," Hood said. "It was a vendetta."

"Against you?"

"Yeah," Hood confirmed. "Kronk called it 'payback time.' He let Pancrazio and me put on this dog-and-pony show about his murder indictment, and all the time he's sitting on an alibi. He knew when it finally came out he'd be free and we'd look

like chumps. I think he was hoping to spring it at the trial, but it doesn't matter much. He nailed me and he knows it. You should have seen him gloat."

"Sorry," Wally said.

Hood shrugged. "Not important," he said. "What's important is that we solve this thing. We need to review all of Kronk's known associates, especially guys he celled with in prison. Maybe there was a third man in on the robbery, someone Gilday didn't name. Or maybe it was a contract job."

Wally had lapsed into contemplative silence.

Hood waited a moment, then asked: "What's on your mind, Wally?"

"I'd like your permission to follow up on somethin'."

"What've you got?"

"It's kind of delicate."

Hood sensed the reticence emanating from his deputy and knew it had been brewing for some time. "I'm listening," he coaxed.

Wally gestured toward the door. "Can I close that?" he asked.

Hood nodded.

"Okay," Wally began, once the room had been sealed, "you remember McGrail, the Kansas City detective who busted that fence, Canone, and gave us the lead on Gilday?"

Again Hood nodded.

"I asked him to send me his background on Canone, files, rap sheets, anything he had."

"And?" Hood said.

"And I found out Canone worked as a driver for Top Quality Distributors." He paused, then added, "It's one of the companies owned by Pancrazio's uncle."

Hood leaned back in his chair and combed his stubby fingers through his hair, as if trying to massage the ramifications of the information into his skull.

"I ain't sayin' there's anything to it," Wally continued defensively, "but I think we ought to check it out."

Hood leaned forward and folded his hands. "You've been thinking this over a while. Give me the worst case scenario."

Wally glanced at the door, then back at the sheriff. "Worst case? Okay. Gilday is dealin' stolen merchandise to Canone, who works for Pancrazio's uncle. Gilday gets busted and makes a deal, but afterward he goes to Canone and comes up with somethin' incriminating about Pancrazio or his family. Then he goes to Pancrazio and says get me off the hook or I'll spill what I know..."

"Hold up," Hood said. "You're talking about a prosecuting attorney, an officer of the court."

"You said worst case," Wally reminded, "but it doesn't even have to be that. I'm not sayin' Pancrazio whacked Gilday, or even that he set it up. I don't know how close he is to his uncle or anybody else in the business. Maybe he just told somebody there about the spot he was in and that person took it upon himself to solve it."

Hood exhaled deeply, as if trying to clear the troublesome threads attached to the pattern Wally had woven. "How well do you know this McGrail?"

"He's honest. He can keep a confidence. I could go up there this weekend, talk to him, nose around a little."

Hood pondered a moment.

"I'll be careful," Wally promised, as if responding to a pledge.

"Okay," Hood said.

After Wally departed, Hood contemplated the decision he had made. The potential complications were confounding. Any leak that his department was investigating the prosecutor in connection with a murder case would be only slightly less explosive than if evidence actually pointed to Pancrazio's involvement. Hood knew he was treading blindly into a minefield with a much greater destructive potential than the one Kronk had laid for him.

* * *

Hood rarely went into the office on a Sunday, but—on the afternoon before Kronk's trial was scheduled to begin—he made an exception.

The sheriff had expected to find the dispatcher and jailer at their posts; he had not expected to find anyone in his office seated at his desk, least of all Wally. His chief deputy was hunched over a typewriter, pecking the keys with his two index fingers when Hood entered.

"This a takeover?" Hood joked.

Wally looked up sheepishly. "Oh. Sorry, sheriff. I wasn't expectin' you in today. I thought it'd be better if I typed this report in here where no one could glance over my shoulder." He started to get up, but Hood motioned for him to remain seated.

"I wasn't expecting you, either," Hood observed. "Not until tonight. When did you get back from Kansas City?"

"I drove back this morning. It was a wild-geese chase."

"How so?"

"The distributing company was owned by somebody else when Canone worked there," Wally explained. "Pancrazio's uncle didn't buy it until later on, so there was no way Canone could have had somethin' on

Pancrazio's family. I chased a few other leads, but there's nothin' to link either Canone or Gilday to Pancrazio."

Hood's expression betrayed both relief and disappointment—clearing Pancrazio again left him with no suspects. "That your report?" Hood asked, gesturing at the page in the typewriter.

"Yeah. Just let me finish this last part."

Hood surveyed his office; it looked somehow different from his new perspective. He noticed a Sunday newspaper lying on the corner of his desk.

"This yours?" he asked Wally, pointing at the newspaper.

"Yeah," Wally replied. "My wife's birthday's comin' up and she's been houndin' me for a new dishwasher. If I start lookin' at the ads at home, she'll catch on."

Hood laughed knowingly. He reached for the paper.

"Seems like I've been sneakin' around a lot today," Wally observed. "Almost makes me feel like..."

"Crap," Hood muttered as the advertising supplements slipped from the folded newspaper, opened, and parachuted to the floor. "That always happens to me." He reached to pick up the supplements, then stopped.

"Finally," Wally said. He struck a last key, pulled the paper from the typewriter, and offered it to Hood.

The sheriff remained stooped over the advertising supplements, oblivious to his deputy.

"Sheriff?" Wally said. He stood and peeked over the desk. "Sheriff?" he repeated.

Hood straightened, leaving the supplements scattered on the floor. "Hand me the folder on Kronk," he said, pointing to the tiered oak boxes. "Should be about the third or fourth one in that top tray."

Wally located the manila folder and passed it across the desk to the sheriff.

Hood opened it, turned through the documents, and extracted a parole report. He examined Kronk's work history as a parolee following his release from prison in 1979.

Hood looked up, his broad smile readily evident. "Finally" is right," he said.

“The state calls Fred Berhorst to the stand,” Pancrazio said.

Kronk's attorney leaped to his feet. "Objection," he shouted.

Hood watched with rapt attention from his vantage point in the first row of the courtroom. The trial was in its third

day, the prosecution had presented its evidence, the defense had followed, and the alibi had been established. The outcome, Hood knew, rested on the testimony of the witness he had found.

"On what grounds, counselor?" the judge asked.

"This witness was not listed in discovery, nor was he called during the prosecution's presentation, your honor."

The judge turned to Pancrazio.

"Your honor," the prosecutor said, "this man is strictly a rebuttal witness. The questioning will serve exclusively to challenge claims made by the defense."

"Objection overruled," the judge intoned. "Proceed."

After the witness had been sworn and seated, Pancrazio asked him to state his name and occupation.

"Name's Fred Berhorst," the witness replied, "I'm the production manager for the *Post-Gazette*."

In response to questions, Berhorst told the court he had been employed as production manager for twenty-three years and his responsibilities included supervising the printing of each daily edition, including the September second Sunday edition.

Pancrazio picked up a news-

paper from the prosecution's table and handed it to his witness. "Can you identify this product and tell the court where it came from?"

Berhorst paged through the edition. "It's a Sunday newspaper from September second. I brought it from our file room at the office because you asked me to."

"How do you know it's the same edition you brought?"

"It's got my initials on the corner of each section. I put 'em on there like you told me."

"And are all its contents included?" Pancrazio asked.

"Yep."

Pancrazio asked that the newspaper be entered into evidence as state's exhibit "J," and it was labeled accordingly.

Pancrazio placed it on a table containing other exhibits and picked up a second newspaper labeled state's exhibit "D." The second newspaper previously had been entered into evidence after Hood testified it was among the items found on the kitchen table at Gilday's apartment. "Now," Pancrazio said as he offered the edition to his witness, "I'd like you to examine this item previously entered into evidence."

Berhorst studied the newspaper.

"Is that edition also dated Sunday, September second?"

"Yep."

"And are all its contents included?"

"Nope. Some are missing."

"Would you please tell the court what is included and what is missing."

"Sure, the late run's here, but the early run's missing."

Prompted by Pancrazio, Berhorst explained that the "early run"—two sections titled "Features" and "Lifestyles"—were printed on Friday night and the advertising supplements were inserted into those sections. The "late run"—four sections titled "News," "Sports," "Business" and "Classified"—were printed early Sunday morning. The early run, he said, then was inserted by machine into the late run to form the completed product.

"Now, Mr. Berhorst," Pancrazio said, "if I found the edition you're holding, there might be any number of explanations. The early run might not have been inserted due to a production problem, or the recipient of the newspaper simply might have thrown those sections away. Correct?"

"I guess so," Berhorst agreed.

"Is there any other explanation for how a person could obtain a late run without the early run?"

"They could maybe get one from the dumpster."

"The dumpster?" Pancrazio prodded.

"Yep. We throw away the first hundred or so editions that come off the press because it takes a while to finetune the inking and the color."

"And at what time do you throw away those rejects?"

"Right away."

"So they would be in the dumpster outside your building by, say, one A.M. Sunday."

"Yep."

Pancrazio paused. "Mr. Berhorst, are you acquainted with the defendant in this case, James A. Kronk, seated at the table there?" Pancrazio pointed at Kronk.

Hood edged forward in his seat, eager to hear every detail of the connection which previously had proved so elusive.

"Yep," Berhorst affirmed.

"And how do you know him?"

"He worked for the paper as a route driver for about four months back in '79."

"And in his capacity as a route driver, he would wait outside the building after midnight Sunday and would be able to see the newspapers being placed in the dumpster?"

"Oh, sure," Berhorst said.

"Besides, the drivers are always pullin' those papers out of the dumpster and readin' 'em to kill time while they wait for their bundles."

Pancrazio betrayed a slight smile. "Recalling your attention to the newspaper you're holding, would that newspaper qualify as a reject, in your opinion?"

"I'd say so."

"But can you say so without equivocation?" Pancrazio challenged. "I mean, how can you distinguish with absolute certainty between the last of the rejects and the first of the acceptable editions if they are printed only seconds apart?"

"This one has a mistake," Berhorst answered, without hesitation.

"A mistake?"

"Yep." He opened the newspaper to page three. "See these obituary pictures? They're in the wrong place. The editor, who always inspects the edition when it starts comin' off the press, caught it. We accidentally switched two negatives during production, so we had to stop the press and switch 'em back. I personally supervised throwing away these papers so they wouldn't get distributed."

"So your testimony is that the newspaper you're holding—the newspaper found at the murder scene—never was distributed; it was, in fact, among the newspapers you personally threw into the dumpster outside the building before one A.M. Sunday."

"No doubt about it," Berhorst affirmed.

Hood escorted Kronk to the jail cell, locked him in, and stared through the bars.

"I've got to hand it to you, Jimmy," Hood said. "You're the first criminal I've run across who framed himself."

Kronk stared at him coldly.

"Wanna tell me about it?"

Hood coaxed.

"I still got appeals," Kronk muttered.

"What you've got is life with a mandatory fifty years," Hood countered. "Personally, I thought they'd give you the death penalty."

"Disappointed?"

"Not a lot," Hood replied.

"Mostly, I'm curious."

Kronk paced across the cell and flopped on the bunk.

"Still not talking?" Hood observed. "Let me tell you how I figure, then, and you correct me if I'm wrong. You found out Gilday was going to set you up. I don't know how. Maybe it was something he said, something he did. You invite him on a fishing trip and tell him you'll pick him up early Sunday—say, around four in the morning. He's too scared not to go along. You get the newspaper out of the dumpster sometime after one A.M. and take it to Gilday's. He lets you in, and he sits

down at the kitchen table to finish his juice and cigarette." Hood paused. "How'm I doin' so far?"

Kronk sulked.

"Somehow you get him to open the paper," Hood continued. "You mention baseball—the pennant race, whatever—and while he's looking at the box scores, you shoot him in the head. You wipe the gun clean, but leave it in the glovebox of your car. That implicates you. Then you head for the lake and go on your fishing expedition. That establishes the alibi. When you come back Sunday night, you stop at Gil-day's mailbox and remove the Sunday newspaper so we won't find a second newspaper later on."

Hood stared at Kronk. "Pretty close?" he asked.

"Forget it, sheriff," Kronk said. "I wasn't talkin' before, and I ain't talkin' now."

"I gotta confess," Hood said, "you had me fooled for a while. After we found out about the alibi, we nearly dropped the charges. I actually started looking for someone else. It never dawned on me that you planned all of it—the murder, the frame, the alibi—right from the start."

Kronk turned to the small window in his cell and looked beyond the bars.

"It wasn't a bad plan, Jimmy," Hood said. "In fact, it was nearly perfect." He considered a moment. "Too nearly perfect."

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UNSOLVED

by Raymond
Smullyan

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

"Yes, I've seen some fine trials, some very fine ones!" said the Knight, after Alice had solved the last puzzle.

"Tell me another," requested Alice.

The puzzle which now follows is one of the best that Alice had ever heard.

"Well," said the Knight, "the trial of last month was quite interesting. Again there were three defendants, and only one of them was guilty. The first defendant spoke first, then the second defendant spoke, and the third defendant spoke last."

"But what did they say?" asked Alice.

"I don't quite remember what they said," replied the Knight, "but I do remember that each of the defendants accused one of the others. However, I can't remember who accused whom. And now, can you figure out who was guilty?"

"Of course not!" replied Alice. "So far you have told me practically nothing! Could you at least tell me which ones lied and which ones told the truth?"

"Very interesting that you should have asked that," replied the Knight, "because two weeks ago I told this case to the White King, who had been unable to attend the trial. The White King asked me the very same question, and when I told him which of the three lied and which ones told the truth, he was able to deduce who the guilty one was."

"Oh, good!" said Alice. "Which ones did lie and which ones did tell the truth?"

"Alas, I have forgotten that by now!" replied the Knight.

"Then I guess it's hopeless for me to solve the mystery," said Alice sadly.

"That's very remarkable that you should have said that!" replied the Knight. "Because the same thing happened to me last week. I met Humpty Dumpty and told the case to him. I also told him

that I had told the White King about the case a week earlier and that the White King was able to solve it after I told him which ones lied and which ones told the truth. Then Humpty Dumpty asked me which ones had lied and which ones had told the truth, but by then I had forgotten, so I couldn't answer Humpty Dumpty's question. Then Humpty Dumpty also said, "Then I guess it is hopeless for me to solve it."

"So Humpty Dumpty didn't solve it," said Alice.

"Oh, yes, he did, because he asked me another question, and when I answered, he was able to solve it."

"What question was that?" asked Alice eagerly.

"Unfortunately I have forgotten by now," replied the White Knight.

"It is very difficult to get information from you," said Alice. "Don't you remember *anything* about the question?"

"Yes," replied the Knight, "I remember that Humpty Dumpty either asked me whether any two consecutive statements were true, or he asked me whether any two consecutive statements were false, but I can't remember which of the two questions he asked, or what answer I gave."

Which of the three defendants was guilty?

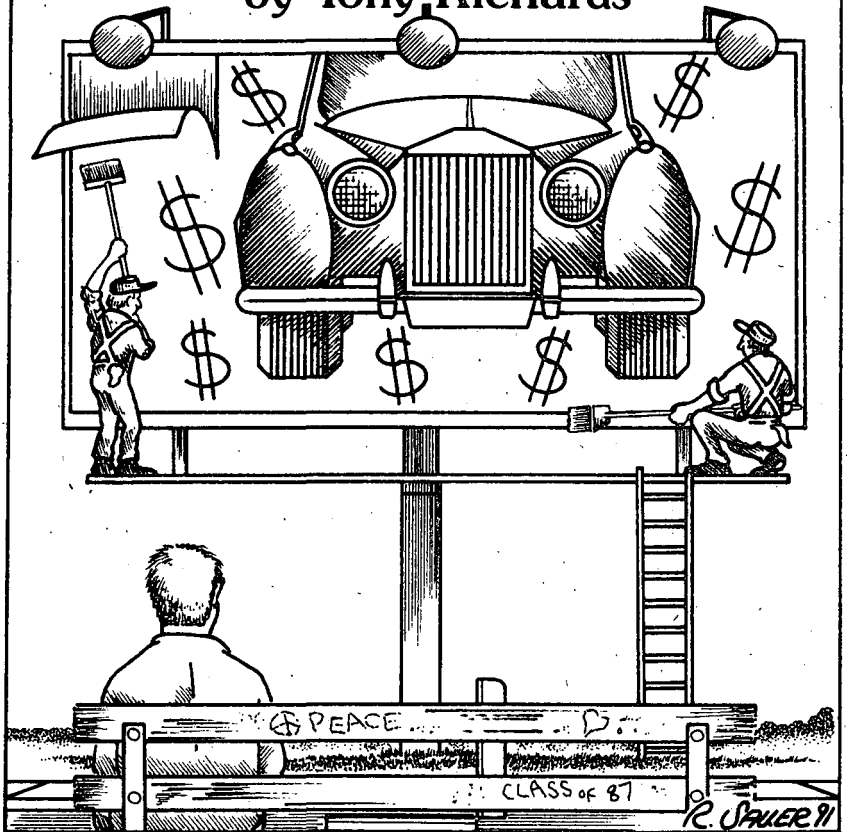
See page 146 for the solution to the August puzzle.

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FICTION

The Writing on the Wall

by Tony Richards



For thirty years, Daniel Willis had spent his lunch break on the exact same bench on the grassy verge in front of Cardew Road. He was a creature of habit and quietly proud of it.

But as he sat down that sunny afternoon, he was reminded that the city did not share his changeless qualities. It altered around him constantly. These days, the bench had obscene messages

carved into the paintwork, and the grass was strewn with litter. Worst of all, Cardew Road had been widened by demolishing the lovely old houses opposite.

Nothing was sacred. Everything changed.

Willis sighed, got his sandwiches out of his briefcase, took a small and precise bite. Began to chew, unhappily.

A large, battered grey van with two ladders strapped to the top roared past, hurling up dust in great, filthy clouds. Willis swallowed his bite of sandwich, choked, then looked down to see that the rest of his lunch was covered with grey specks, ruined.

His mood darkened to despair. He had started to *hate* his life.

He'd been happy in his job, and now the juniors sneered at him. He'd been content in his little flat, and the neighborhood had gone bad. The streets weren't safe any more, the good shops had vanished. And lunch on the bench . . . had become dust.

There was one change Daniel Willis wanted to make. One alone. He wanted to get out of the city. But how? His job was his sole source of income, and his job was here. He couldn't possibly move.

What he needed, he realized, was some kind of guidance on the matter. But from where?

The graffiti on the bench offered plenty of insults and little else. Hordes of people walked by, but they all seemed in a hurry.

He gazed through the exhaust fumes to the far side of the road. A hoarding stood there, advertising a brand of low-tar cigarettes. Willis didn't smoke and was about to look away when the same grey van that had covered him with dust pulled up to the curb beside the board. Two men, one middle-aged and stout, the other young and thin, got out and began to unship the ladders. They both wore identical grey overalls and grey, peaked caps.

Billboard stickers! Willis's attention was captured immediately.

The men propped their ladders at opposite sides of the hoarding. Then they shared out two brooms, two buckets full of paste, and a flapping roll of poster sheets. They climbed up the ladders, and work began.

Willis opted to watch the older, more experienced man, who was quickly pasting over a square section of the billboard. He put up the first roll of the new poster. The broom went back and forth across it, flattening it into place. White letters four feet high glared down from a black background.

DANI

Cryptic so far, but a guessing game might be just the thing to

help forget an empty stomach. *Dani?* Danish bacon?

Willis glanced to the other side. The junior had finally got his first piece up. It read:

IS

Is what? Is . . . ?

Willis watched in fascination as the men completed the top row.

EL WILL

Not *Danish* at all!

Not *is* at all!

DANIEL WILLIS!

Willis sat frozen for a moment, his head spinning. Then he moved.

He bolted across the street, dodging the cars awkwardly. He reached the opposite curb just as the workmen climbed down.

He grabbed the older one.

"My name!" he blurted.

"Eh?"

The workman was huge and had a squashed-looking nose and sparse white hair. His eyes were the same dirty grey as his overalls, as the van. They blinked at Willis impassively.

"Spelled out!" Willis tried to explain. "On the poster! My name! Daniel Willis!"

The man gazed up at his work as though seeing it for the first time.

"This yours, then, guy?" he asked.

"No, of course not."

"Maybe you've got a secret admirer, then. Eh? Heh-heh!"

"I'm sure it's nothing like that," Willis babbled.

"May I see the other pieces?"

"No, you may not." The man sounded aggrieved. "It's against regulations. You might tear them."

"But I have to know what they say."

"You will, guv, you will. Just as soon as we do. The quicker you stop pestering us, the quicker we can finish."

There was no arguing with him, and what he said did make a kind of sense, so Willis backed off and waited by the curb. The questions buzzed like fireflies in his head, so many and so fast they made him dizzy.

Who owned this sign? What were they trying to say to him? And why?

It struck him in a flash.

This was the proverbial *writing on the wall*. He'd needed help, advice, badly—and some divine, supernatural force had sent him guidance.

Someone *up there* was going to show him how to get out!

He fidgeted impatiently. There were five more sections of the poster to go.

True to form, the older workman brushed his next piece up in double-fast time. It was black, and very blank. Nothing. The junior's was the same. They were the corners, that was all.

"Come on," Willis muttered. "Come on!"

The older man flashed him an unpleasant glance and then, in retaliation, slowed his rate of work. All the same, he was much faster than his junior, who seemed to have stopped altogether.

The first two letters came up.

GO

They were followed, a painful while later, by:

TO

Which left the final. Joyfully, Willis looked to where it should have been. It wasn't there.

The junior was staring around blankly.

He seemed to be missing something.

Both men climbed down, consulted. Their tones were hushed, but there was a lot of hand waving and shrugging going on. At last, the junior broke away and went to the rear of the van, disappeared inside. A minute later, he popped out and shook his head.

The older man began clambering into the cab.

"Wait a minute!" Willis yelled. "Where are you going?"

"Not your day, squire," the big man grinned. "Left the last roll back at the depot, ain't we?"

"But this is an important message. I *have* to know what it says."

"Just be patient, matey. We'll only be half an hour."

He closed the door, and the van moved off. Willis gazed after it forlornly.

Half an hour. He'd be late back to work for the first time in thirty years. Panic almost consumed him before he realized that, once the message was completed, it wouldn't matter. He was, at long last, getting out.

His gaze returned to the poster.

Go to . . . ? Go to . . . ? Go to bed? Go to blazes? Go to jail?

It could only be one word. What was it?

He took a step back, to get a better look. Then another.

His heel went over the curb suddenly. He flailed for a second, lost his balance completely.

Fell into the road.

A golden Rolls-Royce bore down on him. Its brakes were squealing, but Willis knew it would never stop in time.

Later, he was vaguely aware of footsteps hurrying around him, of someone shouting for an ambulance to be called.

It was only his knee that hurt. He reached down and touched it. It didn't even feel broken.

A pair of smartly-polished shoes came level with his eyes. A cultured voice began to speak.

"My dear chap, I'm so terribly sorry. My driver's fault entirely. The ambulance is on its way. But I really must compensate you somehow. I'm a reasonably wealthy man—I'm sure that we can reach some agreement. Would fifty thousand be enough? Seventy-five? I can make out the check right now."

The ambulance turned up, and Willis was carried into it, smiling hugely.

Seventy-five thousand pounds!

Enough to leave the city for good!

Ten minutes after he had gone, the battered grey van pulled up again, and the workmen got out. The older one gazed around sullenly.

"Would you believe it," he grumbled. "All that fuss, and the bloke never even waited to see what the last piece was."

He shrugged. Then he and his junior set to work. Before long, the poster was completed. Both men stepped back to inspect it, exchanged puzzled glances.

The message hadn't been GO TO at all. The final letters were UT.

The poster read:

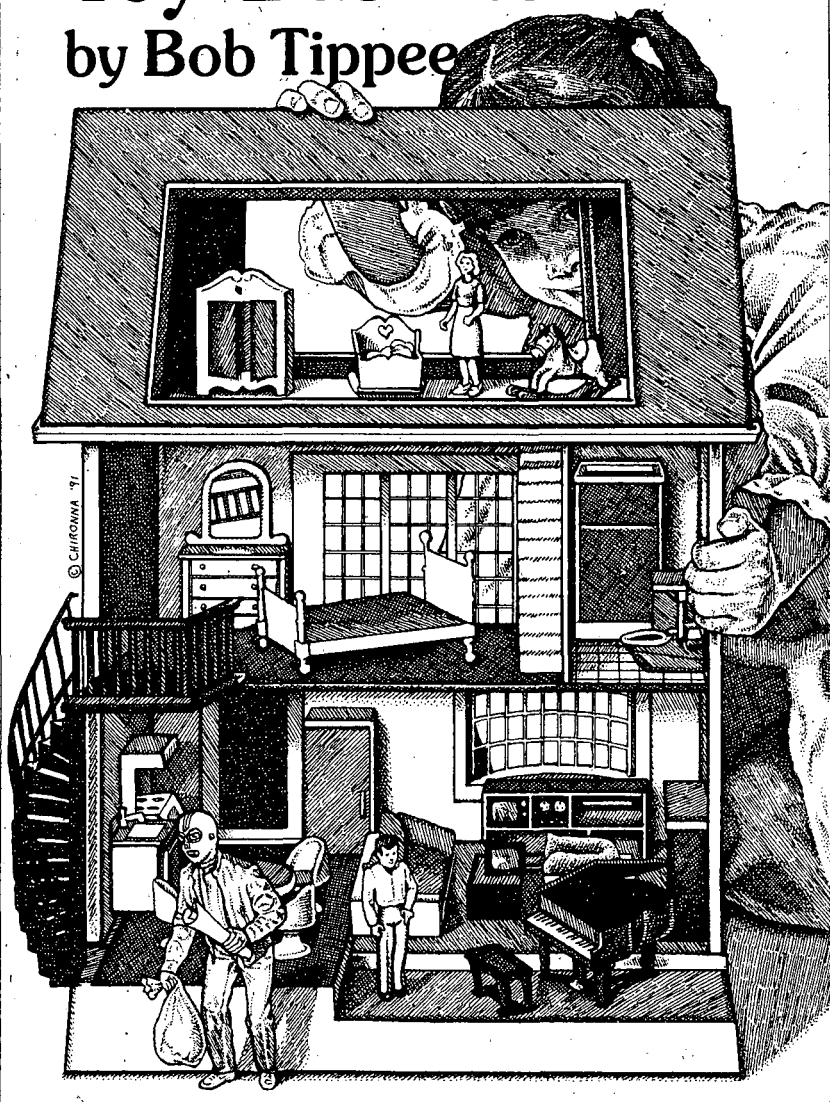
DANIEL WILLIS
GOT OUT

And underneath, in smaller, bright red letters, were the words:
After All!

FICTION

Toy Business

by Bob Tippee



They might have been lovers. Young and casually intense, they belonged with candlelit linen and crystal; she in a pleated blue evening dress that matched her eyes and highlighted short blonde hair; he in a white shirt, red and blue striped tie, and navy blazer. They might have been lovers sharing a quiet meal in a place where the waiters knew how not to intrude. But she never smiled.

"We had a deal," she said after her mostly undisturbed plate of snapper and new potatoes disappeared. "I want my ten thousand."

He kept smiling. "But, Allison, my dear," he said theatrically, "you have not fulfilled your obligations."

She mocked him. "Bud, my dear, I brought you the information: It's an apartment building."

"Not good enough," Bud said, shaking his head.

"At Playroom Villages, knowing the spring product six months in advance is a lot. Only the top people know."

"Secretive, aren't they?" Bud asked, chuckling. "Did you know the chairman and president are brothers-in-law?"

Allison frowned and said nothing.

"Of course you didn't," Bud said. "Nobody knows anything

about Richard Bluell and Herb Johnson. They like secrets. They run a private company, and they run it private. It's safer that way, if you know what I mean. Truth is, I came across the in-law connection by accident. Helps me get business. Shows prospects what I can find out for them."

"I can't tell you how impressed I am," Allison said. "I want my money."

Bud cleared his throat. "Of course, once prospects become clients, they don't care squat about who married whose sister. What they need—what they pay me for—is product information."

"I told you: It's an apartment building," Allison said.

"Details," Bud said. "I need details. This toy apartment building, is it going to be a highrise or a townhouse complex? Do my clients make rooftop pool equipment or kettle cookers?"

Allison leaned back and crossed her arms. "I can't just pick up a phone and find out everything you need."

"I need scale, too," Bud said.

"Kids don't care about scale."

"Spare me. Everybody knows Playroom Villages changes scale to discourage competition in the accessory market. The knockoff accessories have to fit the base product. For ten

grand, I've got to know more about this apartment building than you're telling me so far."

"You want too much," Allison said.

Bud sipped wine, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Come on. We don't want Playroom Villages to have all that accessory money to itself, do we? Not after they stuck a bright young business grad like you off in a corner supervising inventories. Right?"

Allison sighed and shrugged.

"Good," Bud said. "For a minute there I thought you were suffering a loyalty attack. Now, about the product schematics you're going to have for me the next time we meet—"

"Product schematics?" Allison's outburst attracted a few glances from couples at nearby tables. She lowered her voice and asked, "Do you have any idea what I had to do just to find out what the base product is?"

Bud laughed and took another sip of wine.

Allison stared into her water glass and pursed her lips. Then she said, "There's a problem."

"Oh?"

"I think Mr. Bluell suspects a leak."

"Of course he suspects a leak. That's his job."

"I could get fired."

Bud laughed and shook his

head. "If Bluell finds out you're selling product secrets, you'll lose more than your job."

"Get real," Allison said. "This is the toy business."

Bud turned serious. "This is big business, and you'd better understand that quick. Bluell's running a magic money machine. Even boys like those doll houses he comes out with twice a year. Nobody's going to move in on his base product business; it's good for everybody as long as everybody's got a shot at the accessory market."

"Which, in dollar volume, is as big as the base product market," Allison said. "I'm not stupid."

"Then you know what it means to have all the competition confined to the accessory business," Bud said. "I've got clients who'd kill for a piece of that market, which means they'd kill for advance product information from Playroom Villages."

"Nice group of people you work for," Allison said.

"You work for them, too."

Bud took a breath and palmed his forehead, collecting himself. "What I'm saying is, since my clients would kill for the information, your men Bluell and Johnson—well, just don't get caught."

"You're saying they're dangerous?" Allison asked.

"Look at the money," Bud said, smiling again. "Of course they're dangerous."

Allison rubbed her arms as though chilled.

"It's just life," Bud said dismissively. "At some magic number of dollars, money and danger begin meaning the same thing. It's not such a bad thing. It keeps people careful."

Allison reared away from the table. "I don't believe you," she said. "Maybe your sneaky, copycat clients are dangerous. Maybe Mr. Bluell works hard to keep his secrets. But not everybody's dangerous; only people who think so. Count me out. Keep your ten thousand." She started to stand.

Bud raised one hand. "You haven't seen my pictures yet."

Allison stopped. "Pictures?"

Pointing to her chair, Bud said, "Please." She sat.

"I'm just an amateur," Bud said, pulling from his inside jacket pocket a brown envelope. "I never seem to get the lighting right." He slipped three color prints from the envelope. "But I do okay with composition." Fanning the prints on the table in front of Allison, he said, "And my subjects come out clear enough."

The subjects were certainly clear: Herb Johnson, president of Playroom Villages, walking up the steps of an ivy-covered

apartment building in one shot, unlocking the door in the next shot, and stepping inside in the third—his arm, in each shot, around Allison's waist.

"You son of—"

"Allison, please! This is a nice place. Now about those product schematics..."

"I don't believe you," Allison snapped.

"I can always show my photo collection to the newspapers," Bud said. "Wouldn't that be a story? 'Toy exec toys with young biz whiz.' Oh yes, I have pictures dating back to before our first meeting. I was hoping that the money, the chance to get back at a chauvinistic company, would keep you on board."

"You're despicable," Allison said.

Bud dabbed his lips with a napkin. "Consider the fringes," he said. "You're learning things about business they just don't teach in school."

Turning left out of the half-empty restaurant parking lot, Allison glanced into her Sunbird's rear view mirror. Bud turned right. The taillights of his Mercedes quickly disappeared in the neon twinklings of a cold, windy city night.

For twenty minutes, Allison stayed in the heavy traffic downtown. She circled blocks,

doubling back often, checking the mirror each time she turned. Sometimes a pair of headlights followed, sometimes two or three, sometimes none. In the mirror, they all looked the same.

At ten o'clock, Allison maneuvered to Birch Street and headed north toward the suburbs. Five minutes later she parked at the curb of a quiet residential street and trotted to the steps of an ivy-covered apartment building.

The warm inside of the apartment smelled of leather furniture and expensive scotch. Light glowed in a hallway past the kitchen left of the door. In the hall, Herb Johnson appeared, looking surprised.

"I didn't hear your car," he said. He took her coat.

"The wind," she said. They hugged.

"You look great," he said, pushing her to arm's length. He wore a maroon wool turtleneck shirt with a gold Cross pen in the pocket, crisp grey slacks, and shiny cordovan loafers. "Drink?"

Allison frowned, then shrugged and nodded. Herb gestured toward a sofa in the living room opposite the kitchen. At a bar behind the sofa he poured scotch over ice in two glasses.

"Excited?" he asked.

"Yes and no," Allison said. "It seems like a long time."

"Master's degree in finance. City University of London. It's worth a lot." He held out a glass and sat next to her. "And, of course, it—"

"I know," Allison said, taking the drink. "It gets me out of sight for a couple of years."

Herb savored a mouthful of scotch. "I'm very grateful for, you know, everything." He set his right hand on her knee.

Covering his hand with her own, Allison said, "I know. It's the right thing. I'm just tired of the deception."

Herb started to say something, but someone—a man—coughed in the hallway. Allison snapped her head toward the sound.

"I didn't expect you," she said, jumping up as Richard Bluell entered the cosy living room. Bald and barrel-chested, Richard wore a grey cardigan sweater and dark blue tie. He carried a manila folder.

A broad grin wrinkled his round face. "Ah—surprise: the essence of success," he said, opening his arms.

Allison hugged him longer and tighter than she had hugged Herb, who now stood in front of the sofa, smiling.

"We are here to celebrate success, are we not?" Richard asked.

Allison backed to the sofa, sat, and nodded. She pointed to the folder. "Product schematics?"

Richard settled into an overstuffed chair across from the sofa. "Hot off the press," he said proudly.

Allison sighed and rubbed her forehead again. "I thought I'd call Tuesday, set something up someplace noisy where he won't notice if I mess up. I almost blew it tonight. He was trying to convince me that—"

"Hey," Richard said. "You'll do fine. Your work up to now has been superb." His voice broke, and his lips quivered. "We couldn't have trusted anybody else. You know that, don't you?"

"You'll come and see me?" Allison asked.

Richard smiled, sniffed, nodded. "And when you come back we'll have the accessory market to ourselves. And you'll have a corner office with the word 'President' on the door."

"Hear, hear!" said Herb, raising his glass in a toast and draining its contents in one swallow. He added, "I can be reached in Palm Springs.

Please don't call before noon."

They laughed. Then Allison turned to Richard, frowning.

"So the people Bud works for will make a bunch of toys to go into an apartment building like the one in there." She pointed to the folder still in Richard's hand. "And Playroom Villages will introduce a toy airport in the spring. What happens then?"

Slowly, thoughtfully, Richard rubbed his palms together. "A lot of accessory copycats go out of business," he said without emotion.

Allison shook her head. "No, Daddy. I mean what happens to Bud when his clients find out he sold them bad information."

Richard sighed and said nothing. Allison turned to Herb. "Uncle Herb?" she asked. He shrugged.

Finally, Richard said, "It's out of our control, baby."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Allison asked.

"I guess—" Richard said, a note of irritation in his voice. He started again, the irritation gone. "I guess you're learning things about business they just don't teach in school."

FICTION

A Strange View of Murder

by Stephanie Kay Bendel



“I’m afraid our time is almost up,” Dr. Helen Reese said gently to the weeping Mrs. Henderson. Six months earlier, Mr. Henderson had tragically died of bone cancer at the age of thirty-two, and

for the last three of those months his pretty widow had come to see Helen every Friday afternoon.

The woman dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “You’d think after all this time I’d be able to

stop crying," she said with an air of self-deprecation.

"The grieving process usually takes at least a year, and tears are actually healing. Don't suppress them," Dr. Reese said kindly. "I'll see you next Friday, then. If you need to talk to me sooner, call any time. The answering service will know how to reach me."

The young woman sniffed her thanks as she rose from the leather wing chair by the window and handed Helen her check for that day's session. When she had left, Dr. Reese took the pins out of her graying auburn hair and let it fall free to her shoulders. She smoothed the wool skirt of her well-fitted brown suit, kicked off her shoes, and wriggled her toes. Her bunions were especially sore today. Perhaps she shouldn't postpone her surgery much longer. At least it was Friday, and she had seen her last patient for the day. Now she could go home and soak her feet and have a cup of hot tea with Jung purring beside her. She'd listen to Vivaldi perhaps, and read the rest of that article on the early development of sociopathic personalities, those people who seem to have been born without a conscience.

Painfully, she slipped her shoes back on and stepped out of her office into the waiting

room where she saw, to her dismay, a small balding middle-aged man wearing thick glasses and a very expensive gray suit. A matching derby rested on his lap. In years he was not much older than she, but his manners and attitudes seemed to have come out of the Victorian age.

"Mr. Winthrop?" she greeted him in surprise. Cornelius Winthrop was a Monday morning regular, never missed an appointment, was never late, paid all his bills promptly, and was one of the few patients who seemed aware of the clock as he poured out his troubles to her. For him to be here, at this time of day, without an appointment, was—to say the least—unusual behavior for this meticulous man.

He stood. "I'm terribly sorry, but I just couldn't wait until Monday. The most awful thing has happened. My dearest, oldest friend was murdered early this morning."

Helen stifled a gasp. Cornelius Winthrop seldom showed any emotion other than irritation; nonetheless, she knew from their sessions that he was an extremely sensitive person.

"I'm so sorry," she said as she reopened the door to her office and turned on the indirect lights. "Please come in."

He passed up the couch as he

always did—no vulnerable positions for him—put his derby on the corner of her desk, and sat rigidly in the large leather wing chair so recently vacated by the weeping Mrs. Henderson. He folded his hands neatly in his lap.

Helen sat down at her desk. "Perhaps you can tell me—"

Mr. Winthrop leaned forward. "They're saying it was a heart attack, but I know better. He was killed in cold blood."

"If it wasn't a heart attack, how was he murdered?"

He shrank a little and looked down at the floor. "You won't believe me if I tell you," he warned.

Helen sighed inwardly. Cornelius Winthrop was a particularly unusual patient. His greatest fear was that he was going insane; he frequently made the most preposterous statements, then adopted a defensive attitude when others doubted him. On top of that, he often contradicted himself and grew very upset if Helen pointed out that he had done so.

When he had first come to her a year ago, she had seriously considered telling him that she couldn't treat him, for she saw little meaning in his convoluted, digressive ramblings and she grew frustrated trying to make sense of his conflicting statements. But after a

few visits she had begun to get an inkling of how his mind worked, and she found herself strangely fascinated with his peculiar view of life.

Now, it seemed, he was going to show her his peculiar view of death.

She put her notebook on the desk in front of her and took her reading glasses from the top drawer. "Suppose you start at the beginning," she said gently. "Who is it that died—er, was murdered?"

"Alexander Thompson—he inherited the Thompson publishing fortune. You may remember I told you about him when I started seeing you."

Helen searched her memory. "You grew up together, didn't you?"

"In a way. My parents were servants at his family's estate on Long Island. Mother was the cook, father the gardener. We lived in a cottage not far from the main house."

"I remember now. You told me you and Alex were great friends."

"Yes, we were the same age, and the Thompsons, having made their own money, didn't always see eye to eye with most of their neighbors, who lived on inherited wealth. They were quite democratic and treated my family more like friends than hired help."

"They sound like very nice people."

"They were. And most generous. When my father had a stroke and couldn't work any more, Mr. Thompson took care of all the medical bills and continued to pay my father's full salary—he called it a pension. And when I graduated from high school, he paid for my college education. When he found out I needed a master's degree to become a library administrator, he paid for that, too. We owe that family everything."

"And Alex—was he as generous as his father?"

"Oh, yes. Though we travel in different social circles, he's always included me in his activities—as though I were family."

"Perhaps he thought of you as a brother."

Mr. Winthrop nodded. "I certainly thought of him that way. Especially since our parents passed on. I have no other relatives, and he has only one, and a distant one at that."

Helen took stock. So far her patient was being unusually coherent. She had the uneasy feeling that his clarity wasn't going to last much longer.

It didn't.

"Tell me about Alex's death," she said softly.

He slumped, resting his elbows on his knees, and gave her

a look of pure misery. "The doctor listed a heart attack as the cause of death on the death certificate. It's true that Alex had a heart condition, but it wasn't very serious."

"Perhaps it was worse than it appeared to be."

He shook his head vehemently, tears coming to his eyes. That was most uncharacteristic of him, but nothing about Mr. Winthrop surprised Helen any more. She reflected that every patient she'd seen that afternoon had sat in that leather chair and wept. It had been an emotional day. She stood up, leaned across her desk, and offered him a small box of tissues.

Cornelius Winthrop was offended. "I'm not going to cry," he bristled. "I'm no teary-eyed child."

Helen resisted asking him what he called the drops of liquid streaming down his cheeks. She knew from experience he would probably deny they existed.

Now he was reaching down and feeling his impeccably shined patent leather shoes.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"These shoes! They've been hurting me terribly this afternoon. I bought them four weeks ago, and they've been perfectly comfortable until today."

"My feet hurt, too," she said sympathetically. "Perhaps it's just a day for sore feet."

He snorted. "What an absurd idea."

Helen let it pass and returned to the subject at hand. "If Alex didn't die of a heart attack, what killed him?"

Mr. Winthrop straightened up and looked her in the eye. "I did," he said softly. "I killed him."

Dr. Reese stifled a gasp. She ought not to have been surprised by any astonishing statement Cornelius made, but this one caught even her off guard. "But *why*? Why would you kill him?"

He swallowed and looked at her, shamefaced. "Because I realized last night that I hated him. I've hated him and his family since childhood. All his money, controlling everyone. They had no right to make decisions regarding other people's lives. Who did they think they were?"

"A moment ago, you said he and his parents were very generous, that your family owed them everything. You loved him like a brother. Now you say they were manipulative and you've always hated him. Which is it?"

Cornelius looked bewildered. He wriggled uncomfortably in his chair. "They're both true at

the same time, but that can't be, can it?" He looked at her sideways. "Do you suppose I'm schizophrenic?"

Helen smiled and shook her head. "You're not schizophrenic, Mr. Winthrop. But I need to understand more clearly what happened recently between you and him."

He sighed. "Everything seemed normal yesterday. He invited me to dinner at his penthouse. He said he needed to talk to me about a matter that was bothering him."

"And what was that?"

"His niece, Miranda—actually she isn't his niece, she's his uncle's granddaughter, but she calls him uncle and he introduces her as his niece—first cousin once removed is a bit awkward, you see."

"I understand. And she, I take it, is the one remaining relative he had?"

"Yes. He told me she had come to visit him for the first time—she'd been going to school in Europe. He was paying for it, of course."

"Of course."

"We were having a drink in the library before dinner—just he and I—and I could see he was upset, more than I've ever seen him before. He said, 'She's not the person I thought she was.'"

"Did he explain that?"

"Yes. He said, 'I've taken care of that girl all her life. Her father died when she was an infant, and I felt obliged to make sure that the child was well looked after.' He said the child's mother quickly went through her late husband's fortune and then remarried. I understand she's had several marriages since. Alex's family regarded her as a gold-digger, and they felt no further obligation to her. But the child was a Thompson, so Alex set up a trust to ensure her financial security. She couldn't touch the principal, of course, but the income was enough for her to live comfortably."

Helen was taking notes, and now she paused and looked up, pushing her gold-rimmed reading glasses higher on her nose. "But when he finally met her—just recently—he was disillusioned?"

"Yes. She had written, saying she was coming to New York to visit, but when she showed up a few days ago, she arrived with a boyfriend, and the express purpose of obtaining a large sum of money from Alex."

"Oh?"

"You see, she's been studying art in Paris for several years, but now she's decided that what she really wants to do is be an actress. The boyfriend is

a film producer, and according to the girl, he's a genius and all he needs is a couple of million dollars to underwrite his latest project, in which she is going to star. She wanted Alex to give her the principal from her trust, so she could fund him."

"I take it Alex wasn't too pleased."

"He told her the terms of the trust were clear. She had a right only to the income. The principal was not hers."

"And how did she respond to that?"

"Alex said she was undaunted. She then suggested he advance her a couple of million on her inheritance. She assumed that since she was his only living relative, he would eventually be leaving her a large sum of money."

"And was this, in fact, true?"

"Actually, that was why Alex wanted to talk to me. As it was, she stood to inherit a great deal upon his death, but her attitude had given him second thoughts. 'She's her mother's daughter,' he said, shaking his head. 'She assumes that she has a right to whatever she wants. No responsibility. No thought of doing anything for herself. Thinks she's supposed to be taken care of forever, and I'm afraid I've fostered this despicable attitude.'"

Mr. Winthrop cleared his

throat. "Then he said he'd made up his mind to disinherit her. His attorney was drawing up the new will and he would sign it on Monday. 'I'd be doing her no favor if I gave her the money,' he said. 'She'll still have the interest from the trust. If she wants more than that, she'll have to work for it.'"

He paused and Helen tried to figure out where his line of reasoning was leading. "And you thought Alex was being unfair?"

"Oh, no! I agreed with him one hundred percent. It's one thing to help those who can't help themselves, and I can see giving people money because you choose to. But I don't at all feel you have to give it to everyone who wants it."

"So even though Alex was a very generous fellow, you thought he was justified in disinheriting Miranda?"

"Absolutely." Mr. Winthrop was staring at his feet again, consternation in his face. For a moment Helen was tempted to say, "You may take your shoes off if you don't mind my doing the same," but she knew he would be horrified at such informality between them, so she said instead, "I'm afraid I don't understand why you say you hated Alex."

"Oh, that was later, when

Miranda and her, er, friend Tony joined us for dinner."

"What happened?"

"Well, as soon as she entered the room—it was the most amazing thing! I saw at once how wrong Alex was about her. She's a charming young woman, stunningly beautiful—like a china doll, with delicate skin and dark eyes. Though she's a fragile-looking girl, she has enormous presence. When she walked into the room, it took my breath away. In the soft light of the chandeliers, she positively glowed. And she's very talented, too. She deserves to have the opportunity to perform on screen."

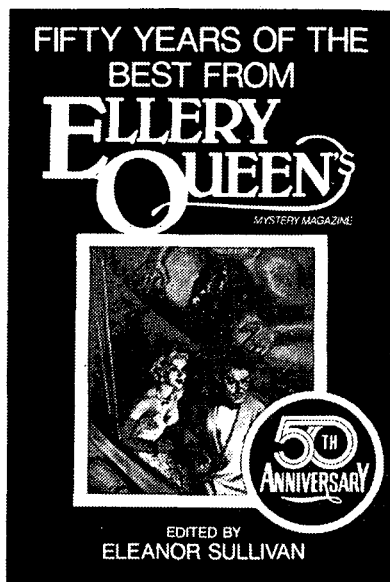
Helen looked up from her notes. Out the window, she saw darkness falling on the city and wondered how long it would take Mr. Winthrop to get to the point. "You just said she was very talented. How do you know that?"

He looked irritated. "I just know," he snapped.

She stared at him. Very interesting, she thought, and wondered whether Mr. Winthrop had fallen suddenly, violently, in love. "Go on."

"Dinner was delightful. Miranda's friend Tony is every bit as entertaining as she, and they both have sparkling wits. I noticed, too, how exceedingly attentive she was to Alex."

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As well she might be, hoping for a couple of million dollars from him, thought Dr. Reese.

"I take it you also liked her gentleman friend."

He brightened. "Anthony Vinci. Tony. Oh, yes! Such an interesting, intelligent young man—thoughtful, too. He's dark, like Miranda, and you can tell he's a theater person. There's something about him that's electric. Captures your attention—again like Miranda. They were excellent dinner companions."

"And how did Alex behave during the meal?"

"He was very quiet. He was civil, of course, but I noticed that he wasn't laughing at any of Miranda's amusing tales, and he was rather curt with Tony when dessert was being served. That's when the mask fell."

"Mask?"

"Well, it was like a mask. I was looking at Alex, and all of a sudden, his face changed. Instead of my dear old friend, I saw a cold, calculating man—a man who thought that just because he had money and power he had the right to decide what other people would do with their lives. Why shouldn't Miranda go into the theater if she wanted? Why is that so much worse than art school?"

Dr. Reese was fascinated. "So

you think he should have given her the money?"

"Yes!"

"A moment ago, you said you agreed with Alex. I believe you used the word, 'absolutely.'"

He leaned forward angrily. "You're trying to confuse me."

She pressed on gently. "Which is it?"

Mr. Winthrop put his fingers to his temples. "I *must* be losing my mind. I can't make sense of all this. Am I going crazy?"

Helen smiled. "No, you're very sane. Of that I'm sure."

"Do you understand this?"

"Not completely. I need to know more. Please tell me what happened next."

He looked at her doubtfully, stared at his feet for a moment, then said in a near whisper, "That's when I did it."

"What did you do?"

"I *hated* him. The most horrible, burning hatred you can imagine. It was consuming me. I felt sick at my stomach with revulsion. *I wanted Alex dead.*"

He paused. His complexion had taken on a slightly ashen color. "You have no idea what it's like to experience such feelings. It was ghastly, yet in a strange way—almost pleasurable."

"Then what happened?"

"Miranda and Tony said they were going out for a while. She promised to be back in time to"

bring Alex his bedtime cocoa. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek."

"And how did Alex react?"

"He was—cool toward her. She seemed not to notice. She left the room with a smile and flounce of her lovely hair."

"And then?"

"Alex and I talked for a while."

"Did you still hate him?"

"Oh, no. Actually I felt quite ashamed of myself for having had such violent thoughts. I felt—dirty. I couldn't wait to get home so I could take a long shower. In fact, that's exactly what I did."

"So you and Alex parted friends?"

"Of course."

"And what time was it when you left?"

"Oh, elevenish, I'd say."

"And when did you find out he'd died?"

"This morning. Around seven thirty. His housekeeper called me. She said the doctor estimated he'd passed away around one."

"So when did you kill him?"

"I *told* you. At dinner. I *hated* him. I wanted him dead."

"You *hated* him to death?" Helen asked incredulously.

"I told you you wouldn't believe me," Mr. Winthrop said with irritation in his voice. "No

one ever does. Even the police wouldn't believe me."

Helen's heart sank. "The police?"

"I told them, of course. Went down to the 51st Street station this afternoon and asked to speak with a homicide detective. Told him everything. I had to. I have that much integrity, at least. But he didn't take me seriously. He didn't even take notes. He said there was no law against hating people. Do you see why I'm afraid I'm losing my mind?"

"Yes," Dr. Reese said softly. "I understand how confusing this is to you, but I don't believe you're losing your mind."

"I suppose you're going to say that it was only coincidence that Alex died so soon after I left. It's *not*. I can *feel* it's not."

"I quite agree with you. I'm not a strong believer in coincidence. I think there must be something we don't yet see."

He stared at her for a long moment, then whispered, "You believe me? You really do?"

She nodded and smiled.

He seemed lost in thought. Helen waited, trying to ignore her growing hunger pangs. It was now long past her usual dinner time. Jung would be hungry, too, she realized. He'd wait at her when she came home, indignant that his supper was so late.

"If it wasn't a coincidence," Mr. Winthrop said slowly, "then I must somehow be responsible."

"I'm not sure that's a fair assumption. You see, we tend to think of coincidence as purely accidental, but some authorities, including Jung, believe that many coincidences are meaningful."

"Ah, yes, Jung," Mr. Winthrop mused. "He's hungry, you know."

Helen stared at her patient. "Do you know who Jung is?"

"Of course." The little man cleared his throat. "Swiss psychoanalyst. Born 1875, died 1961. Studied under Freud, although he eventually rejected some of the old man's theories. He was—"

"Yes," Helen interrupted. "But a moment ago you said Jung was hungry."

He looked at her in surprise. "Did I say that? Yes, I *did*, didn't I? But it doesn't make sense. I *must* be going crazy."

"I have a cat named Jung," Helen said gently.

"Very amusing." He sniffed.

"I imagine my cat is quite hungry at this time," Helen persisted.

Cornelius Winthrop frowned at her. "And you think I was talking about a cat I didn't even know existed?" He stood up and drew a long breath. "Dr. Reese,

your credentials are impeccable. I checked you out quite thoroughly before I came to you. Everyone in the field says you're one of the best psychiatrists in the state. But suddenly I'm not at all sure you can help me."

He turned to leave.

"I believe you, Mr. Winthrop. I can't always explain the things you tell me, but I believe them."

He stared at her for a long moment, then his expression softened. "Well, you won't believe the rest," he said finally as he sat down again.

"There's more?"

"Yes. I saw Alex during the night. As a matter of fact, it must have been around one o'clock as he was dying."

"You went back to his house at one in the morning?"

"No, he came to mine, in a manner of speaking."

"Oh?"

"I woke up suddenly—I don't know why—and he was standing there at the foot of my bed. It was the queerest thing, for all the lamps were off and the curtains were drawn, so there was no light in the room, yet I saw him clearly. He had the saddest expression, and he said, 'I should never have told her.' Alarmed, I drew the sheets up over my face, and when I looked a moment later,

he was gone. What do you think of that?" He looked at Helen with malicious satisfaction.

"What do *you* think?" she returned.

"Why, it's as clear as the nose on your face—an hallucination. Probably brought on by my guilt feelings. Although I thought I ought to check some other possibilities first."

"Such as?"

"I went to the medical library this morning and discovered that hallucinations may have organic as well as psychological causes. For example, various drugs—of, course, I don't take any—and there are some illnesses, like Parkinson's disease, but they have other symptoms, none of which I have. In fact, I was able to eliminate every possibility but one."

"Which was?"

Mr. Winthrop leaned forward in triumph. "A brain tumor. I suspect I have a brain tumor."

Helen stifled the urge to giggle. She knew no one else who would be so delighted at such an ominous possibility. But this little man had spent his life looking for the reason his mind did such unusual things. Perhaps, after so much effort, any answer, even a grim one, would be welcome. She strove to make her voice compassionate. "I don't think you have to worry about a brain tumor."

He was indignant that she would reject his clever diagnosis. "So what do *you* think I saw last night?"

She said gently, "Perhaps Alex knew he was dying, and he thought of you, his dear old friend. Perhaps he was saying goodbye."

"You mean I saw an apparition, Alex's spirit? A *ghost*?"

She shrugged.

"Hah! If you believe *that*, you're crazier than I am."

"You're not crazy, Mr. Winthrop."

"You keep saying that, but you never explain what's going on. If you understand this, why don't you tell me?"

She smiled and leaned back in her chair. "Partly because I don't understand enough yet clearly to explain what's going on. But there's a more important reason." She removed her gold-rimmed reading glasses and smiled at him. "Many years ago, when I was in medical school, my teachers impressed upon me a very important dictum: Knowledge without insight is next to useless; in fact, it may be harmful. Therefore, a good therapist doesn't give a diagnosis to a patient before he is ready to understand his condition."

Cornelius Winthrop's complexion became livid. "In other words, I'm paying you an outra-

geous sum of money to wait until I figure it out for myself."

She cleared her throat. By now she was used to his tantrums. "I hope that I'm helping you to figure it out."

"Hah! By trying to convince me I'm seeing ghosts? It'll be a cold day in hell before I start believing in apparitions. I'm a reasonably educated man, Dr. Reese. I think I know an hallucination when I see one." He stomped out of her office angrily, slamming the door behind him.

Helen chuckled to herself and rubbed her eyes. It had been a long day.

The six block walk to her apartment took her past the Grayson Gallery, and as was her habit, she lingered a minute to look through the barred glass windows at the artwork displayed there. They had acquired a small Impressionist painting of an old country fair by an artist whose name Helen did not recognize. For the last three days, she had paused at the window, admiring the piece and debating whether it was worth the hefty price on the tag in front of it.

A well-dressed middle-aged couple was strolling by when the woman was drawn to the works in the gallery window.

"Look at that one," she said.

The man snorted as he lit his

pipe. "Who'd pay five thousand dollars for something like that?"

"Actually, it's very good," the woman said calmly.

"How can you say that? I see a man with three eyes and his nose coming out of his ear."

"Why must you always criticize what you don't understand, Howard?"

"You mean you understand this?"

"Of course," the woman said patiently. "It's neocubist. The trick to understanding this kind of painting is to realize that you're looking at the subject from more than one perspective at the same time."

"Huh?" The man drew upon his pipe, frowning in puzzlement.

"Don't you see? We're looking at the man head-on and in profile at the same time."

Howard shook his head. "Just the same, I'd never pay five thousand for it."

As the couple walked away, Helen stared at the painting they'd been discussing. Funny, it reminded her of Mr. Winthrop. Then she stepped to the curb and flagged down a taxi. "The police station on 51st Street, please."

Homicide Detective Daniel March was a short, muscular man with piercing blue eyes

and a gruff voice. "You want to talk about Alex Thompson? Lady, I hope you don't want to confess to killing him. I've already had one kook in here today who insisted he hated Thompson to death. Every time someone prominent dies, the weirdos come out of the woodwork. Listen, Thompson's doctor says he had a heart attack."

"I am a psychiatrist," she said, handing him her card. "And I have confidential information that leads me to believe otherwise."

March sat straighter in his chair. "Yeah? Suppose you sit down and tell me about it."

"I believe Mr. Thompson was given a drug to induce his heart attack, most likely an overdose of his own medication, probably administered in his bedtime cocoa."

The detective was eyeing her closely now. "Yeah? And who did it?"

"I have reason to believe his first cousin once removed—a Miranda Thompson—who is visiting him, wanted him dead. She came to ask him for money—two million dollars—and he refused, so she asked for an advance on her inheritance. Alex had already called his lawyer asking him to draw up a new will disinheriting the woman. I think he made the mistake of telling her so."

"And so she killed him before he had a chance to sign the new will?"

"Exactly. I can't tell you any more than that. I suggest you order an autopsy on Mr. Thompson if you haven't already. I'll make a list of probable drugs to look for. I'm sure the medical examiner will think of others when you explain the situation to him. You can check with the attorney to confirm Thompson's intentions about the will. The servants will tell you that Miranda was taking his cocoa to him at bedtime while she was visiting."

"Lady, I need more than your speculations. I need proof."

"I can't give you that. You'll have to find the proof yourself. I suggest you get busy before the woman covers her tracks. Oh, and you might look into the background of her fiancé, an Anthony Vinci. I should imagine he has a rather shady past."

"We can subpoena your records, you know," he growled.

She smiled thinly. "That takes time, and time is what you don't have, Detective March. I suggest you quickly secure as much evidence as possible."

He scowled as she left.

It was raining lightly when the cab drew up in front of her apartment. Her head was still spinning with new understand-

ing. Perhaps someday she would write a paper on this case.

On the other hand, it might well be professional suicide. No one wanted to acknowledge there were people like Mr. Winthrop. Even her colleagues, while occasionally admitting in private that they had encountered such patients, would vociferously deny it in public. And this wasn't the kind of phenomenon easily demonstrated under scientific conditions. Perhaps the paper should wait.

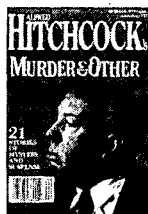
But, in the meantime, a small percentage of people would go through life convinced they were losing their minds. Extremely perceptive people, in some ways. Like poor Mr. Winthrop, who wandered through the world like a very sensitive but badly tuned radio, picking up other people's thoughts and feelings, unable to distinguish them from his own. Temporarily seeing the world through someone else's eyes, often in sharp contradic-

tion to his own personal views. As he had felt the young widow's grief when he sat in the chair she had recently vacated, as he had experienced the pain of Dr. Reese's bunions, so he had known the narcissism and murderous hatred of Miranda Thompson as he dined with her. And he'd blamed himself for her feelings. He'd picked up Alex's dying thoughts, too. He saw life from a constantly changing perspective—a sort of neocubist view of the universe. No wonder he thought he was losing his mind. A pity he didn't have enough imagination to believe in ghosts. If he had, he might have been able to understand himself. As it was, if he didn't return to her, Helen imagined he would simply go from one psychiatrist to another, rejecting them whenever they came close to the truth.

Helen Reese sighed as she unlocked the door to her apartment. Jung was meowing loudly at her for being late.

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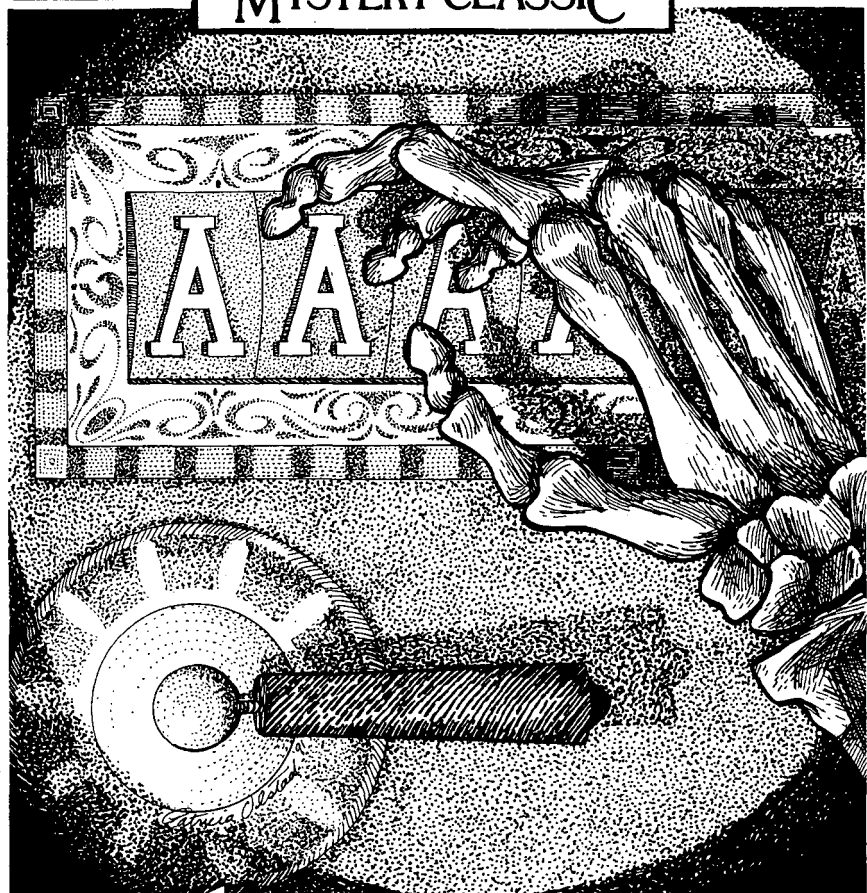
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The — Puzzle Lock

by R. Austin Freeman

I do not remember what was the occasion of my dining with Thorndyke at Giamborini's on the particular evening that is now in my mind. Doubtless, some piece of work completed had seemed to justify the modest festival. At any rate, there we were, seated at a somewhat retired table, selected by Thorndyke, with our backs to the large window through which the late June sunlight streamed. We had made our preliminary arrangements, including a bottle of Barsac, and were inspecting dubiously a collection of semi-edible hors d'œuvres, when a man entered and took possession of a table just in front of ours which had apparently been reserved for him, since he walked directly to it and drew away the single chair that had been set aslant against it.

I watched with amused interest his methodical procedure, for he was clearly a man who took his dinner seriously. A regular customer, too, I judged by the waiter's manner and the reserved table with its single chair. But the man himself interested me. He was out of the common, and there was a suggestion of character, with perhaps a spice of oddity, in his appearance. He appeared to be about sixty years of age, small and spare, with a much wrinkled, mobile, and rather whimsical face, surmounted by a crop of white upstanding hair. From his waistcoat pocket protruded the ends of a fountain pen, a pencil, and a miniature electric torch such as surgeons use; a silver-mounted Coddington lens hung from his watch guard, and the middle finger of his left hand bore the largest seal ring that I have ever seen.

"Well," said Thorndyke, who had been following my glance, "what do you make of him?"

"I don't quite know," I replied. "The Coddington suggests a naturalist or a scientist of some kind, but that blatant ring doesn't. Perhaps he is an antiquary or a numismatist or even a philatelist. He deals with small objects of some kind."

At this moment a man who had just entered strode up to our friend's table and held out his hand, which the other shook with no great enthusiasm, as I thought. Then the newcomer fetched a chair and, setting it by the table, seated himself and picked up the menu card while the other observed him with a shade of disapproval. I judged that he would rather have dined alone and that the personality of the new arrival—a flashy, bustling, obtrusive type of man—did not commend him.

From this couple my eye was attracted to a tall man who had halted near the door and stood looking about the room as if seeking someone. Suddenly he spied an empty, single table and, bearing

down on it, seated himself and began anxiously to study the menu under the supervision of a waiter. I glanced at him with slight disfavor. One makes allowances for the exuberance of youth, but when a middle-aged man presents the combination of heavily-greased hair parted in the middle, a waxed mustache of a suspiciously intense black, a pointed imperial, and a single eyeglass, evidently ornamental in function, one views him with less tolerance. However, his getup was not my concern whereas my dinner was, and I had given this my undivided attention for some minutes when I heard Thorndyke emit a soft chuckle.

"Not bad," he remarked, setting down his glass.

"Not at all," I agreed, "for a restaurant wine."

"I was not alluding to the wine," said he, "but to our friend Badger."

"The inspector!" I exclaimed. "He isn't here, is he? I don't see him."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Jervis," said he. "It is a better effort than I thought. Still, he might manage his properties a little better. That is the second time his eyeglass has been in the soup."

Following the direction of his glance, I observed the man with the waxed mustache furtively wiping his eyeglass; and the temporary absence of the monocular grimace enabled me to note a resemblance to the familiar features of the detective officer.

"If you say that is Badger, I suppose it is," said I. "He is certainly a little like our friend. But I shouldn't have recognized him."

"I don't know that I should," said Thorndyke, "but for the little unconscious tricks of movement. You know the habit he has of stroking the back of his head and of opening his mouth and scratching the side of his chin. I saw him do it just now. He had forgotten his imperial until he touched it, and then the sudden arrest of movement was very striking. It doesn't do to forget a false beard."

"I wonder what his game is," said I. "The disguise suggests that he is on the lookout for somebody who might know him, but apparently that somebody has not turned up yet. At any rate, he doesn't seem to be watching anybody in particular."

"No," said Thorndyke. "But there is somebody whom he seems rather to avoid watching. Those two men at the table in front of ours are in his direct line of vision, but he hasn't looked at them once since he sat down, though I noticed that he gave them one quick glance before he selected his table. I wonder if he has observed us. Probably not, as we have the strong light of the window

behind us and his attention is otherwise occupied."

I looked at the two men and from them to the detective, and I judged that my friend was right. On the inspector's table was a goodsized fern in an ornamental pot, and this he had moved so that it was directly between him and the two strangers, to whom he must have been practically invisible; and now I could see that he did, in fact, steal an occasional glance at them over the edge of the menu card. Moreover, as their meal drew to an end, he hastily finished his own and beckoned to the waiter to bring his bill.

"We may as well wait and see them off," said Thorndyke, who had already settled our account. "Badger always interests me. He is so ingenious, and he has such shockingly bad luck."

We had not long to wait. The two men rose from the table and walked slowly to the door, where they paused to light their cigars before going out. Then Badger rose, with his back towards them and his eyes on the mirror opposite, and as they went out, he snatched up his hat and stick and followed. Thorndyke looked at me inquiringly.

"Do we indulge in the pleasures of the chase?" he asked, and as I replied in the affirmative, we too made our way out and started in the wake of the inspector.

As we followed Badger at a discreet distance, we caught an occasional glimpse of the quarry ahead, whose proceedings evidently caused the inspector some embarrassment, for they had a way of stopping suddenly to elaborate some point that they were discussing, whereby it became necessary for the detective to drop farther in the rear than was quite safe, in view of the rather crowded state of the pavement. On one of these occasions, when the older man was apparently delivering himself of some excruciating joke, they both turned suddenly and looked back, the joker pointing to some object on the opposite side of the road. Several people turned to see what was being pointed at, and of course, the inspector had to turn, too, to avoid being recognized. At this moment the two men popped into an entry, and when the inspector once more turned they were gone.

As soon as he missed them, Badger started forward almost at a run and presently halted at the large entry of the Celestial Bank Chambers, into which he peered eagerly. Then, apparently sighting his quarry, he darted in, and we quickened our pace and followed. Halfway down the long hall we saw him standing at the door of a lift, frantically pressing the call button.

"Poor Badger!" chuckled Thorndyke as we walked past him un-

observed. "His usual luck! He will hardly run them to earth now in this enormous building. We may as well go through to the Blenheim Street entrance."

We pursued our way along the winding corridor and were close to the entrance when I noticed two men coming down the staircase that led to the hall.

"By Jingo! Here they are!" I exclaimed. "Shall we run back and give Badger the tip?"

Thorndyke hesitated. But it was too late. A taxi had just driven up and was discharging its fare. The younger man, catching the driver's eye, ran out and seized the door handle, and when his companion had entered the cab, he gave an address to the driver and, stepping in quickly, slammed the door. As the cab moved off, Thorndyke pulled out his notebook and pencil and jotted down the number of the vehicle. Then we turned and retraced our steps, but when we reached the lift door, the inspector had disappeared. Presumably, like the incomparable Tom Bowling, he had gone aloft.

"We must give it up, Jervis," said Thorndyke. "I will send him—anonymously—the number of the cab, and that is all we can do. But I am sorry for Badger."

With this we dismissed the incident from our minds—at least I did, assuming that I had seen the last of the two strangers. Little did I suspect how soon and under what strange and tragic circumstances I should meet with them again.

It was about a week later that we received a visit from our old friend Superintendent Miller of the Criminal Investigation Department. The passing years had put us on a footing of mutual trust and esteem, and the capable, straightforward detective officer was always a welcome visitor.

"I've just dropped in," said Miller, cutting off the end of the inevitable cigar, "to tell you about a rather queer case that we've got in hand. I know you are always interested in queer cases."

Thorndyke smiled blandly. He had heard that kind of preamble before, and he knew, as did I, that when Miller became communicative we could safely infer that the Millerian bark was in shoal water.

"It is a case," the superintendent continued, "of a very special brand of crook. Actually there is a gang, but it is the managing director that we have particularly got our eye on."

"Is he a regular 'habitual,' then?" asked Thorndyke.

"Well," replied Miller, "as to that, I can't positively say. The fact

is that we haven't actually seen the man to be sure of him."

"I see," said Thorndyke, with a grim smile. "You mean to say that you have got your eye on the place where he isn't."

"At the present moment," Miller admitted, "that is the literal fact. We have lost sight of the man we suspected, but we hope to pick him up again presently. We want him badly, and his pals, too. It is probably quite a small gang, but they are mighty sly; a lot too smart to be at large. And they'll take some catching, for there is someone running the concern with a good deal more brains than crooks usually have."

"What is their lay?" I asked.

"Burglary," he replied. "Jewels and plate, but principally jewels; and the special feature of their work is that the swag disappears completely every time. None of the stuff has ever been traced. That is what drew our attention to them. After each robbery we made a round of all the fences, but there was not a sign. The stuff seemed to have vanished into smoke. Now that is very awkward. If you never see the men and you can't trace the stuff, where are you? You've got nothing to go on."

"But you seem to have got a clue of some kind," I said.

"Yes. There isn't a lot in it, but it seemed worth following up. One of our men happened to travel down to Colchester with a certain man, and when he came back two days later, he noticed this same man on the platform at Colchester and saw him get out at Liverpool Street. In the interval there had been a jewel robbery at Colchester. Then there was a robbery at Southampton, and our man went at once to Waterloo and saw all the trains in. On the second day, behold! the Colchester sportsman turns up at the barrier, so our man, who had a special taxi waiting, managed to track him home and afterwards got some particulars about him. He is a chap named Shemmonds; belongs to a firm of outside brokers. But nobody seems to know much about him and he doesn't put in much time at the office.

"Well, then, Badger took him over and shadowed him for a day or two, but just as things were looking interesting, he slipped off the hook. Badger followed him to a restaurant and, through the glass door, saw him go up to an elderly man at a table and shake hands with him. Then he took a chair at the table himself, so Badger popped in and took a seat near them where he could keep them in view. They went out together and Badger followed them, but he lost them in the Celestial Bank Chambers. They went up in the lift just before he could get to the door, and that was the last

he saw of them. But we have ascertained that they left the building in a taxi and that the taxi set them down at Great Turnstile."

"It was rather smart of you to trace the cab," Thorndyke remarked.

"You've got to keep your eyes skinned in our line of business," said Miller. "But now we come to the real twister. From the time those two men went down Great Turnstile, nobody has set eyes on either of them. They seem to have vanished into thin air."

"You found out who the other man was, then?" said I.

"Yes. The restaurant manager knew him; an old chap named Luttrell. And we knew him, too, because he has a thumping burglary insurance, and when he goes out of town, he notifies his company, they make arrangements with us to have the premises watched."

"What is Luttrell?" I asked.

"Well, he is a bit of a mug, I should say, at least that's his character in the trade. Goes in for being a dealer in jewels and antiques, but he'll buy anything—furniture, pictures, plate, any blooming thing. Does it for a hobby, the regular dealers say. Likes the sport of bidding at the sales. But the knockout men hate him; never know what he's going to do. Must have private means, for though he doesn't often drop money, he can't make much. He's no salesman. It is the buying that he seems to like. But he is a regular character, full of cranks and oddities. His rooms in Thavies Inn look like the British Museum gone mad. He has got electric alarms from all the doors up to his bedroom and the strongroom in his office is fitted with a puzzle lock instead of keys."

"That doesn't seem very safe," I remarked.

"It is," said Miller. "This one has fifteen alphabets. One of our men has calculated that it has about forty million changes. No one is going to work that out, and there are no keys to get lost. But it is that strongroom that is worrying us as well as the old joker himself. The Lord knows how much valuable stuff there is in it. What we are afraid of is that Shemmonds may have made away with the old chap and be lying low, waiting to swoop down on that strongroom."

"But you said that Luttrell goes away sometimes," said I.

"Yes; but then he always notifies his insurance company and he seals up his strongroom with a tape round the doorhandle and a great seal on the doorpost. This time he hasn't notified the company, and the door isn't sealed. There's a seal on the doorpost—left from last time, I expect—but only the cut ends of tape. I got the

caretaker to let me see the place this morning, and by the way, doctor, I have taken a leaf out of your book. I always carry a bit of squeezing wax in my pocket now and a little box of French chalk. Very handy they are, too. As I had 'em with me this morning, I took a squeeze of the seal. May want it presently for identification."

He brought out of his pocket a small tin box from which he carefully extracted an object wrapped in tissue paper. When the paper had been tenderly removed there was revealed a lump of moulding wax, one side of which was flattened and bore a sunk design.

"It's quite a good squeeze," said Miller, handing it to Thorndyke. "I dusted the seal with French chalk so that the wax shouldn't stick to it."

My colleague examined the "squeeze" through his lens and, passing it and the lens to me, asked:

"Has this been photographed, Miller?"

"No," was the reply, "but it ought to be before it gets damaged."

"It ought, certainly," said Thorndyke, "if you value it. Shall I get Polton to do it now?"

The superintendent accepted the offer gratefully and Thorndyke accordingly took the squeeze up to the laboratory, where he left it for our assistant to deal with. When he returned, Miller remarked:

"It is a baffling case, this. Now that Shemmonds has dropped out of sight, there is nothing to go on and nothing to do, but wait for something else to happen; another burglary or an attempt on the strongroom."

"Is it clear that the strongroom has not been opened?" asked Thorndyke.

"No, it isn't," replied Miller. "That's part of the trouble. Luttrell has disappeared, and he may be dead. If he is, Shemmonds will probably have been through his pockets. Of course there is no strongroom key. That is one of the advantages of a puzzle lock. But it is quite possible that Luttrell may have kept a note of the combination and carried it about him. It would have been risky to trust entirely to memory. And he would have had the keys of the office about him. Anyone who had those could have slipped in during business hours without much difficulty. Luttrell's premises are empty, but there are people in and out all day going to the other offices. Our man can't follow them all in. I suppose you can't make any suggestion, doctor?"

"I am afraid I can't," answered Thorndyke. "The case is so very much in the air. There is nothing against Shemmonds but bare

suspicion. He has disappeared only in the sense that you have lost sight of him, and the same is true of Luttrell—though there is an abnormal element in his case. Still, you could hardly get a search warrant on the facts that are known at present.”

“No,” Miller agreed, “they certainly would not authorize us to break open the strongroom, and nothing short of that would be much use.”

Here Polton made his appearance with the wax squeeze in a neat little box such as jewellers use.

“I’ve got two enlarged negatives,” said he, “nice clear ones. How many prints shall I make for Mr. Miller?”

“Oh, one will do, Mr. Polton,” said the superintendent. “If I want any more, I’ll ask you.” He took up the little box and, slipping it in his pocket, rose to depart. “I’ll let you know, doctor, how the case goes on, and perhaps you wouldn’t mind turning it over a bit in the interval. Something might occur to you.”

Thorndyke promised to think over the case, and when we had seen the superintendent launched down the stairs, we followed Polton up to the laboratory, where we each picked up one of the negatives and examined it against the light. I had already identified the seal by its shape—a *vesica piscis* or boat-shape—with the one that I had seen on Mr. Luttrell’s finger. Now, in the photograph, enlarged three diameters, I could clearly make out the details. The design was distinctive and curious rather than elegant. The two triangular spaces at the ends were occupied respectively by a *memento mori* and a winged hourglass and the central portion was filled by a long inscription in Roman capitals, of which I could at first make nothing.

“Do you suppose this is some kind of cryptogram?” I asked.

“No,” Thorndyke replied. “I imagine the words were run together merely to economize space. This is what I make of it.”

He held the negative in his left hand, and with his right wrote down in pencil on a slip of paper the following four lines of doggerel verse:

“Eheu alas how fast the dam fugaces
Labuntur anni especially in the cases
Of poor old blokes like you and me Posthumus
Who only waits for vermes to consume us.”

“Well,” I exclaimed, “it is a choice specimen; one of old Luttrell’s merry conceited jests, I take it. But the joke was hardly worth the

labor of engraving on a seal."

"It is certainly a rather mild jest," Thorndyke admitted. "But there may be something more in it than meets the eye."

He looked at the inscription reflectively and appeared to read it through once or twice. Then he replaced the negative in the drying rack and, picking up the paper, slipped it into his pocketbook.

"I don't quite see," said I, "why Miller brought this case to us or what he wants you to think over. In fact, I don't see that there is a case at all."

"It is a very shadowy case," Thorndyke admitted. "Miller has done a good deal of guessing, and so has Badger; and it may easily turn out that they have found a mare's nest. Nevertheless, there is something to think about."

"As, for instance—?"

"Well, Jervis, you saw the men; you saw how they behaved; you have heard Miller's story, and you have seen Mr. Luttrell's seal. Put all those data together and you have the material for some very interesting speculation, to say the least. You might even carry it beyond speculation."

I did not pursue the subject, for I knew that when Thorndyke used the word "speculation," nothing would induce him to commit himself to an opinion. But later, bearing in mind the attention that he seemed to bestow on Mr. Luttrell's schoolboy verses, I got a print from the negative and studied the foolish inscription exhaustively. But if it had any hidden meaning—and I could imagine no reason for supposing that it had—that meaning remained hidden; and the only conclusion at which I could arrive was that a man of Luttrell's age might have known better than to write such nonsense.

The superintendent did not leave the matter long in suspense. Three days later he paid us another visit and half-apologetically reopened the subject.

"I am ashamed to come badgering you like this," he said, "but I can't get this case out of my head. I've a feeling that we ought to get a move of some kind on. And, by the way—though that is nothing to do with it—I've copied out the stuff on that seal and I can't make any sense of it. What the deuce are fugaces? I suppose 'vermes' are worms, though I don't see why he spelt it that way."

"The verses," said Thorndyke, "are apparently a travesty of a Latin poem, one of the odes of Horace which begins:

'Eheu! fugaces, Postume, Postume,
Labuntur anni,'

which means, in effect, 'Alas! Postume, the flying years slip by.'"

"Well," said Miller, "any fool knows that—any middle-aged fool, at any rate. No need to put it into Latin. However, it's of no consequence. To return to this case; I've got an authority to look over Luttrell's premises—not to pull anything about, you know, just to look round. I called in on my way here to let the caretaker know that I should be coming in later. I thought that perhaps you might like to come with me. I wish you would, doctor. You've got such a knack of spotting things that other people overlook."

He looked wistfully at Thorndyke, and as the latter was considering the proposal, he added:

"The caretaker mentioned a rather odd circumstance. It seems that he keeps an eye on the electric meters in the building and that he has noticed a leakage of current in Mr. Luttrell's. It is only a small leak, about thirty watts an hour. But he can't account for it in any way. He has been right through the premises to see if any lamp has been left on in any of the rooms. But all the switches are off everywhere, and it can't be a short circuit. Funny, isn't it?"

It was certainly odd, but there seemed to me nothing in it to account for the expression of suddenly awakened interest that I detected in Thorndyke's face. However, it evidently had some special significance for him, for he asked almost eagerly:

"When are you making your inspection?"

"I am going there now," replied Miller, and he added coaxingly: "Couldn't you manage to run round with me?"

Thorndyke stood up. "Very well," said he. "Let us go together. You may as well come, too, Jervis, if you can spare an hour."

I agreed readily, for my colleague's hardly disguised interest in the inspection suggested a definite problem in his mind; and we at once issued forth and made our way by Mitre Court and Fetter Lane to the abode of the missing dealer, an old fashioned house near the end of Thavies Inn.

"I've been over the premises once," said Miller as the caretaker appeared with the keys, "and I think we had better begin the regular inspection with the offices. We can examine the stores and living rooms afterwards."

We accordingly entered the outer office, and as this was little more than a waiting room, we passed through into the private office, which had the appearance of having been used also as a sitting room or study. It was furnished with an easy chair, a range of bookshelves, and a handsome bureau bookcase, while in the end wall was the massive iron door of the strongroom. On this, as the

chief object of interest, we all bore down, and the superintendent expounded its peculiarities.

"It is quite a good idea," said he, "this letter lock. There's no keyhole—though a safe lock is pretty hopeless to pick even if there was a keyhole—and no keys to get lost. As to guessing what the 'open sesame' may be—well, just look at it. You could spend a lifetime on it and be no forrader."

The puzzle lock was contained in the solid iron doorpost, through a slot in which a row of fifteen A's seemed to grin defiance on the would-be safe robber. I put my finger on the milled edges of one or two of the letters and rotated the discs, noticing how easily and smoothly they turned.

"Well," said Miller, "it's no use fumbling with that. I'm just going to have a look through his ledger and see who his customers were. The bookcase is unlocked. I tried it last time. And we'd better leave this as we found it."

He put back the letters that I had moved and turned away to explore the bookcase, and as the letter lock appeared to present nothing but an insoluble riddle, I followed him, leaving Thorndyke earnestly gazing at the meaningless row of letters.

The superintendent glanced back at him with an indulgent smile.

"The doctor is going to work out the combination," he chuckled. "Well, well. There are only forty billion changes, and he's a young man for his age."

With this encouraging comment, he opened the glass door of the bookcase and, reaching down the ledger, laid it on the desk-like slope of the bureau.

"It is a poor chance," said he, opening the ledger at the index, "but some of these people may be able to give us a hint where to look for Mr. Luttrell, and it is worthwhile to know what sort of business he did."

He ran his finger down the list of names and had just turned to the account of one of the customers when we were startled by a loud click from the direction of the strongroom. We both turned sharply and beheld Thorndyke grasping the handle of the strongroom door, and I saw with amazement that the door was now slightly ajar.

"God!" exclaimed Miller, shutting the ledger and starting forward, "he's got it open!" He strode over to the door and, directing an eager look at the indicator of the lock, burst into a laugh. "Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed. "Why, it was unlocked all the time! To

think that none of us had the sense to tug the handle. But isn't it just like old Luttrell to have a fool's answer like that to the blessed puzzle."

I looked at the indicator, not a little astonished to observe the row of fifteen A's, which apparently formed the key combination. It may have been a very amusing joke on Mr. Luttrell's part, but it did not look very secure. Thorndyke regarded us with an inscrutable glance and still grasped the handle, holding the door a bare half-inch open.

"There is something pushing against the door," said he. "Shall I open it?"

"May as well have a look at the inside," replied Miller. Thereupon Thorndyke released the handle and quickly stepped aside. The door swung slowly open and the dead body of a man fell out into the room and rolled over onto its back.

"Mercy on us!" gasped Miller, springing back hastily and staring with horror and amazement at the grim apparition. "That is not Luttrell." Then, suddenly starting forward and stooping over the dead man, he exclaimed, "Why, it is Shemmonds. So that is where he disappeared to. I wonder what became of Luttrell."

"There is somebody else in the strongroom," said Thorndyke; and now, peering in through the doorway, I perceived a dim light which seemed to come from a hidden recess and by which I could see a pair of feet projecting round the corner. In a moment Miller had sprung in, and I followed. The strongroom was L-shaped in plan, the arm of the L formed by a narrow passage at right angles to the main room. At the end of this a single small electric bulb was burning, the light of which showed the body of an elderly man stretched on the floor of the passage. I recognized him instantly in spite of the dimness of the light and the disfigurement caused by a ragged wound on the forehead.

"We had better get him out of this," said Miller, speaking in a flurried tone, partly due to the shock of the horrible discovery and partly to the accompanying physical unpleasantness, "and then we will have a look round. This wasn't just a mere robbery. We are going to find things out."

With my help he lifted Luttrell's corpse, and together we carried it out, laying it on the floor of the room at the farther end, to which we also dragged the body of Shemmonds.

"There is no mystery as to how it happened," I said, after a brief inspection of the two corpses. "Shemmonds evidently shot the old man from behind with the pistol close to the back of the head. The

hair is all scorched round the wound of entry and the bullet came out at the forehead."

"Yes," agreed Miller, "that is all clear enough. But the mystery is why on earth Shemmonds didn't let himself out. He must have known that the door was unlocked. Yet instead of turning the handle, he must have stood there like a fool, battering at the door with his fists. Just look at his hands."

"The further mystery," said Thorndyke, who all this time had been making a minute examination of the lock both from without and within, "is how the door came to be shut. That is quite a curious problem."

"Quite," agreed Miller. "But it will keep. And there is a still more curious problem inside there. There is nearly all the swag from that Colchester robbery. Looks as if Luttrell was in it."

Half-reluctantly he reentered the strongroom, and Thorndyke and I followed. Near the angle of the passage he stooped to pick up an automatic pistol and a small, leatherbound book, which he opened and looked into by the light of the lamp. At the first glance he uttered an exclamation and shut the book with a snap.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, holding it out to us. "It is the nominal roll, address book, and journal of the gang. We've got them in the hollow of our hand, and it is dawning upon me that old Luttrell was the managing director whom I have been looking for so long. Just run your eyes along those shelves. That's loot, every bit of it. I can identify the articles from the lists that I made out."

He stood looking gloatingly along the shelves with their burden of jewelry, plate, and other valuables. Then his eye lighted on a drawer in the end wall just under the lamp, an iron drawer with a disproportionately large handle and bearing a very legible label inscribed "Unmounted Stones."

"We'll have a look at his stock of unmounted gems," said Miller, and with that he bore down on the drawer and, seizing the handle, gave a vigorous pull. "Funny," said he. "It isn't locked, but something seems to be holding it back."

He planted his foot on the wall and took a fresh purchase on the handle.

"Wait a moment, Miller," said Thorndyke, but even as he spoke, the superintendent gave a mighty heave, the drawer came out a full two feet, there was a loud click, and a moment later the strongroom door slammed.

"Good God!" exclaimed Miller, letting go the drawer, which im-

mediately slid in with another click. "What was that?"

"That was the door shutting," replied Thorndyke. "Quite a clever arrangement, like the mechanism of a repeater watch. Pulling out the drawer wound up and released a spring that shut the door. Very ingenious."

"But," gasped Miller, turning an ashen face to my colleague, "we're shut in!"

"You are forgetting," said I—a little nervously, I must admit—"that the lock is as we left it."

The superintendent laughed, somewhat hysterically. "What a fool I am!" said he. "As bad as Shemmonds. Still, we may as well—" Here he started along the passage and I heard him groping his way to the door, and later heard the handle turn. Suddenly the deep silence of the tomblike chamber was rent by a yell of terror.

"The door won't move! It's locked fast!"

On this I rushed along the passage with a sickening fear at my heart. And even as I ran, there rose before my eyes the horrible vision of the corpse with the battered hands that had fallen out when we opened the door of this awful trap. He had been caught as we were caught. How soon might it not be that some stranger would be looking in on our corpses.

In the dim twilight by the door I found Miller clutching the handle and shaking it like a madman. His self-possession was completely shattered. Nor was my own condition much better. I flung my whole weight on the door in the faint hope that the lock was not really closed, but the massive iron structure was as immovable as a stone wall. I was, nevertheless, gathering myself up for a second charge when I heard Thorndyke's voice close behind me.

"That is no use, Jervis. The door is locked. But there is nothing to worry about."

As he spoke, there suddenly appeared a bright circle of light from the little electric lamp that he always carried in his pocket. Within the circle, and now clearly visible, was a second indicator of the puzzle lock on the inside of the doorpost. Its appearance was vaguely reassuring, especially in conjunction with Thorndyke's calm voice; and it evidently appeared so to Miller, for he remarked, almost in his natural tones:

"But it seems to be unlocked still. There is the same AAAAAA that it showed when we came in."

It was perfectly true. The slot of the letter lock still showed the range of fifteen A's, just as it had when the door was open. Could

it be that the lock was a dummy and that there was some other means of opening the door? I was about to put this question to Thorndyke when he put the lamp into my hand and, gently pushing me aside, stepped up to the indicator.

"Keep the light steady, Jervis," said he, and forthwith he began to manipulate the milled edges of the letter discs, beginning, as I noticed, at the right, or reverse end of the slot, and working backwards. I watched him with feverish interest and curiosity, as also did Miller, looking to see some word of fifteen letters develop in the slot. Instead of which, I saw, to my amazement and bewilderment, my colleague's finger transforming the row of A's into a succession of M's, which, however, were presently followed by an L and some X's. When the row was completed, it looked like some remote, antediluvian date set down in Roman numerals.

"Try the handle now, Miller," said Thorndyke.

The superintendent needed no second bidding. Snatching at the handle, he turned it and bore heavily on the door. Almost instantly a thin line of light appeared at the edge; there was a sharp click, and the door swung right open. We fell out immediately—at least the superintendent and I did—thankful to find ourselves outside and alive. But as we emerged, we both became aware of a man, white-faced and horror-stricken of aspect, stooping over the two corpses at the other end of the room. Our appearance was so sudden and unexpected—for the massive solidity of the safe door had rendered our movements inaudible outside—that, for a moment or two, he stood immovable, staring at us, wild-eyed and open-mouthed. Then, suddenly, he sprang up erect, and, darting to the door, opened it and rushed out with Miller close on his heels.

He did not get very far. Following the superintendent, I saw the fugitive wriggling in the embrace of a tall man on the pavement, who, with Miller's assistance, soon had a pair of handcuffs snapped on the man's wrists and then departed with his captive in search of a cab.

"That's one of 'em, I expect," said Miller as we returned to the office; then, as his glance fell on the open strongroom door, he mopped his face with his handkerchief. "That door gives me the creeps to look at it," said he. "Lord! what a shakeup that was! I've never had such a scare in my life. When I heard that door shut and I remembered how that poor devil Shemmonds came tumbling out—phoo!" He wiped his brow again and, walking towards the strongroom door asked, "By the way, what was the magic word after all?" He stepped up to the indicator, and, after a quick glance,

looked round at me in surprise. "Why!" he exclaimed, "blow me if it isn't AAAA still! But the doctor altered it, didn't he?"

At this moment Thorndyke appeared from the strongroom, where he had apparently been conducting some explorations, and to him the superintendent turned for an explanation.

"It is an ingenious device," said he; "in fact, the whole strongroom is a monument of ingenuity, somewhat misapplied but perfectly effective, as Mr. Shemmond's corpse testifies. The key combination is a number expressed in Roman numerals, but the lock has a fly-back mechanism which acts as soon as the door begins to open. That was how Shemmonds was caught. He, no doubt purposely, avoided watching Luttrell set the lock—or else Luttrell didn't let him—but as he went in with his intended victim, he looked at the indicator and saw the row of A's, which he naturally assumed to be the key combination. Then, when he tried to let himself out, of course, the lock wouldn't open."

"It is rather odd that he didn't try some other combinations," said I.

"He probably did," replied Thorndyke, "but when they failed he would naturally come back to the A's, which he had seen when the door was open. This is how it works."

He shut the door and then, closely watched by the superintendent and me, turned the milled rims of the letter discs until the indicator showed a row of numerals thus: MMMMMMMM-CCCLXXXV. Grasping the handle, he turned it and gave a gentle pull when the door began to open. But the instant it started from its bed, there was a loud click and all the letters of the indicator flew back to A.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Miller. "It must have been an awful suck in for that poor blighter Shemmonds. Took me in, too. I saw those A's and the door open, and I thought I knew all about it. But what beats me, doctor, is how you managed to work it out. I can't see what you had to go on. Would it be allowable to ask how it was done?"

"Certainly," replied Thorndyke, "but we had better defer the explanation. You have got those two bodies to dispose of and some other matters, and we must get back to our chambers. I will write down the key combination, in case you want it, and then you must come and see us and let us know what luck you have had."

He wrote the numerals on a slip of paper, and when he had handed it to the superintendent, we took our leave.

"I find myself," said I as we walked home, "in much the same

position as Miller. I don't see what you had to go on. It is clear to me that you not only worked out the lock combination—from the seal inscription, as I assume—but that you identified Luttrell as the director of the gang. I don't, in the least, understand how you did it."

"And yet, Jervis," said he, "it was an essentially simple case. If you review it and cast up the items of evidence, you will see that we really had all the facts. The problem was merely to coordinate them and extract their significance. Take first the character of Luttrell. We saw the man in company with another, evidently a fairly intimate acquaintance. They were being shadowed by a detective, and it is pretty clear that they detected the sleuth, for they shook him off quite neatly. Later, we learn from Miller that one of these men is suspected to be a member of a firm of swell burglars and that the other is a well-to-do, rather eccentric, and very miscellaneous dealer, who has a strongroom fitted with a puzzle lock. I am astonished that the usually acute Miller did not notice how well Luttrell fitted the part of the managing director whom he was looking for. Here was a dealer who bought and sold all sorts of queer but valuable things, who must have had unlimited facilities for getting rid of stones, bullion, and silver, and who used a puzzle lock. Now, who uses a puzzle lock? No one, certainly, who can conveniently use a key. But to the manager of a gang of thieves it would be a valuable safeguard, for he might at any moment be robbed of his keys, and perhaps made away with. But he could not be robbed of the secret password, and his possession of it would be a security against murder. So you see that the simple probabilities pointed to Luttrell as the head of the gang.

"And now consider the problem of the lock. First, we saw that Luttrell wore on his left hand a huge, cumbrous seal ring, that he carried a Coddington lens on his watch guard and a small electric lamp in his pocket. That told us very little. But when Miller told us about the lock and showed us the squeeze of the seal, and when we saw that the seal bore a long inscription in minute lettering, a connection began to appear. As Miller justly observed, no man—and especially no elderly man—would trust the key combination exclusively to his memory. He would carry about him some record to which he could refer in case his memory failed him. But that record would hardly be one that anybody could read, or the secrecy and safety of the lock would be gone. It would probably be some kind of cryptogram, and when we saw this inscription and considered it in conjunction with the lens and the lamp, it seemed highly

probable that the key combination was contained in the inscription; and that probability was further increased when we saw the nonsensical doggerel of which the inscription was made up. The suggestion was that the verses had been made for some purpose independent of their sense. Accordingly, I gave the inscription very careful consideration.

"Now we learned from Miller that the puzzle lock had fifteen letters. The key might be one long word, such as 'superlativeness,' a number of short words, or some chemical or other formula. Or it was possible that it might be of the nature of a chronogram. I have never heard of chronograms being used for secret records or messages, but it has often occurred to me that they would be extremely suitable. And this was an exceptionally suitable case."

"Chronogram," said I. "Isn't that something connected with medals?"

"They have often been used on medals," he replied. "In effect, a chronogram is an inscription some of the letters of which form a date connected with the subject of the inscription. Usually the date letters are written or cut larger than the others for convenience in reading, but of course this is not essential. The principle of a chronogram is this. The letters of the Roman alphabet are of two kinds: those that are simply letters and nothing else, and those that are numerals as well as letters. The numeral letters are M = a thousand, D = five hundred, C = one hundred, L = fifty, X = ten, V = five, and I = one. Now, in deciphering a chronogram, you pick out all the numeral letters and add them up without regard to their order. The total gives you the date.

"Well, as I said, it occurred to me that this might be of the nature of a chronogram, but as the lock had letters and not figures, the number, if there was one, would have to be expressed in Roman numerals, and it would have to form a number of fifteen numeral letters. As it was thus quite easy to put my hypothesis to the test, I proceeded to treat the inscription as a chronogram and decipher it; and behold! it yielded a number of fifteen letters, which, of course, was as near certainty as was possible, short of actual experiment."

"Let us see how you did the decipherment," I said as we entered our chambers and shut the door. I procured a large note-block and pencil and, laying them on the table, drew up two chairs.

"Now," said I, "fire away."

"Very well," he said. "We will begin by writing the inscription in proper chronogram form with the numeral letters double size

and treating the U's as V's and the W's as double V's according to the rules."

Here he wrote out the inscription in Roman capitals thus:

"EHEV ALAS HOVV FAST THE DAM FVGACES
LABVNTVR ANNI ESPECIALLY IN THE CASES
OF POOR OLD BLOKES LIKE YO V AND ME POSTHVMVS
VVHO ONLY VVAIT FOR VERMES TO CONSVME VS."

"Now," said he, "let us make a column of each line and add them up, thus:

1	2	3	4
V = 5	L = 50	L = 50	VV = 10
L = 50	V = 5	D = 500	L = 50
VV = 10	V = 5	L = 50	VV = 10
D = 500	I = 1	L = 50	I = 1
M = 1000	C = 100	I = 1	V = 5
V = 5	I = 1	V = 5	M = 1000
C = <u>100</u>	L = 50	D = 500	C = 100
1670	L = 50	M = 1000	V = 5
	I = 1	V = 5	M = 1000
	C = <u>100</u>	M = 1000	V = <u>5</u>
	363	V = <u>5</u>	2186
		3166	

"Now," he continued, "we take the four totals and add them together, thus:

1670
363
3166
2186
7385

and we get the grand total of seven thousand three hundred and eighty-five, and this, expressed in Roman numerals, is MMMMMMMCCCLXXXV. Here, then, is a number consisting of fifteen letters, the exact number of spaces in the indicator of the puzzle lock; and I repeat that this striking coincidence, added to, or rather multiplied into, the other probabilities, made it practically certain that this was the key combination. It remained only to test

it by actual experiment."

"By the way," said I, "I noticed that you perked up rather suddenly when Miller mentioned the electric meter."

"Naturally," he replied. "It seemed that there must be a small lamp switched on somewhere in the building, and the only place that had not been examined was the strongroom. But if there was a lamp alight there, someone had been in the strongroom. And, as the only person who was known to be able to get in was missing, it seemed probable that he was in there still. But if he was, he was pretty certainly dead; and there was quite a considerable probability that someone else was in there with him, since his companion was missing, too, and both had disappeared at the same time. But I must confess that that spring drawer was beyond my expectations, though I suspected it as soon as I saw Miller pulling at it. Luttrell was an ingenious old rascal; he almost deserved a better fate. However, I expect his death will have delivered the gang into the hands of the police."

Events fell out as Thorndyke surmised. Mr. Luttrell's little journal, in conjunction with the confession of the spy who had been captured on the premises, enabled the police to swoop down on the disconcerted gang before any breath of suspicion had reached them, with the result that they are now secured in strongrooms of another kind whereof the doors are fitted with appliances as effective as, though less ingenious than, Mr. Luttrell's puzzle lock.

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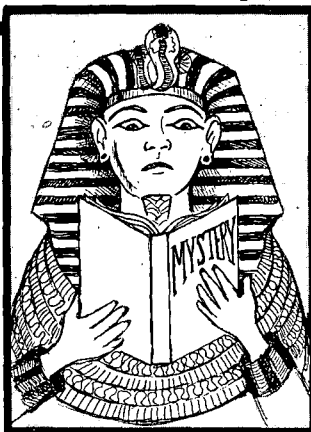


Illustration by Sheila Smith

Buying real estate in California has become a risky business, especially if your loan comes from a failed S&L. But few people have been killed over such transactions—and that is what worries Victor Wuamett's realtor-hero, Chase Randel. That and the fact that he isn't getting any commission for his detective work into the mysterious poisoning of client Frank Baker. **Deeds of Trust** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 198 pp) is the second in the Chase Randel series set in the real estate business of Silicon Valley. A quick read.

Marjorie Eccles involves Chief Inspector Gil Mayo and his sergeant Martin Kite in the suspicious death (is it suicide?) by shotgun of a freelance journalist, Rupert Fleming, in the woods near the farm home of Fleming's father-in-law. The widow is suspiciously calm; the father-in-law has motive; and there seem to be a lot of "other women" involved. When additional people become missing and more bodies start to turn up, **More Deaths Than One** (Doubleday, \$15.00, 180 pp) become a matter of principle for Mayo—one of the bodies is that of a police officer.

Seventy-seven-year-old Rupert Frost finds himself involved in the investigation of the death of an associate in his old Wall Street firm in Haughton Murphy's **Murder Saves Face** (Simon and

Schuster, \$18.95, 268 pp). Is the motive somehow linked to the merger that the victim was due to preside over the following day? Or is there some other, more powerful reason for killing the beautiful, talented Juliana Merriman and hiding her body in the law library under the code of regulations for the State of New Mexico?

All of the "incomers" in the small village of Beckworth are subjected to vandalism, by graffiti, on their new cottages and homes. None of the incomers know the villagers well, nor do they know each other. But when people start to die, Detective Chief Inspector Webb has to get to know them all—there may be a connection between the deaths and these strangely threatening symbols painted on doors. **Symbols at Your Door** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$15.00, 181 pp) by Anthea Fraser shows that weekend people and newcomers have just as much trouble fitting in in England as they do in the U.S., with perhaps more sinister results.

Whitney Logan is a down-at-the-heels lawyer in L.A., trying to accumulate enough billable hours to pay her rent, when a well-dressed "housewife" offers her a thousand dollars in crisp new bills as a retainer to find her "missing" Central American maid. Whitney is not a detective, but she needs the money and it seems easy enough. It isn't until she finds the maid, using a different name and quite dead, that she teams up with Chicana hooker Lupe—Whitney doesn't speak Spanish—to investigate the world of illegals, drugs, and revolution in East L.A. **Dogtown** (Viking, \$18.95, 263 pp) by Mercedes Lambert is a fun first novel about what promises to be an interesting investigative team.

Daphne Dead and Done For by Jonathan Ross (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 191 pp) starts out by involving Detective Superintendent George Rogers in a mysterious advertisement sent to the village paper—Daphne Gosse is missing, and the ad implies that her unsavory husband Clifford has done her in. Of course, the paper refuses to print the ad (potentially libelous); reporter Liz Gallagher follows Rogers around at not so discreet distances (there *may* be a story anyway); and Rogers finds *Clifford* Gosse dead and done for. Nice twists and turns in this, the eighth in the series.

Edward Mackin introduces a new series with **The Nominative Case** (Walker, \$18.95, 199 pp) and college professors Larry Gridiron and Augustus Frye. Both teachers of English at a less-than-prestigious New York City community college, they get mixed up in murder and detection when a not particularly well-liked colleague is found dead in a stolen car. At first attributed to suicide, the death brings out Frye's guilt—it was he who involved the dead

man in plagiarism as the result of a practical joke—and gets Gridiron assigned to an unwelcome deanship. Using the typical motives of academe, Frye and Gridiron add a welcome twist to a plot about murder in a college community.

Doran Fairweather returns in Mollie Hardwick's **The Dreaming Damozel** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 183 pp). Doran and her rebel vicar husband are having money problems, and Doran has become obsessed with the art of the Pre-Raphaelites. When she discovers a possibly unknown painting of model Lizzie Sidal by Gabriel Rossetti, she gets drawn into a series of murders, all of which seem staged to appear like Pre-Raphaelite subject matter. As in previous books in the series, there is a touch of gothic about the story, but the plot is tight and the solution nicely presented in the final pages.

Undersheriff Bill Gastner of Posadas County, New Mexico, is old enough to retire—that is what his new boss is constantly hinting in **Heartshot** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 246 pp). But Gastner and detective Estelle Reyes seem to be the only staff in the department who can investigate a series of deaths that started a year ago with the overdose death of a high school student. Hard drugs appear to have made the scene in sleepy Posadas County, and the murder that always follows dealing in cocaine has also arrived. Gastner and Reyes make a likeable team of investigators, and the New Mexico setting is as hot, dry, and colorful as a Georgia O'Keeffe painting. Steven F. Havill has begun a most interesting series.

Jaqueline Girdner introduced Kate Jasper in *Adjusted to Death* (1990); Kate has returned in **The Last Resort** (Diamond Mystery, \$3.95, 240 pp). Kate's ex-husband is a prime suspect in the murder of his "bimbo" girlfriend—the same one who broke up their marriage. But Kate, ever the optimist, flies to his side on the day the divorce is finalized—to a new health spa in southern California. More deaths follow, and more suspects arrive, as Kate tries to clear her ex without becoming reinvolved with him.

Hannah Wakefield is the pen name for two women, both of whom were born, raised, and presumably educated in the U.S. and who now reside in England. One of the pair is a practicing lawyer; the other is an editor. Their heroine is an American lawyer practicing law in London who has found herself tied up and held prisoner in an empty building somewhere in England. **A Woman's Own Mystery** (St. Martin's, \$14.95, 172 pp) has Dee Street investigating, via flashback, the disappearance of a client, the death of a peace activist, and the possible involvement of the IRA. Interesting premise—an American practicing law in England.

In Loves Music, Loves to Dance (Simon and Schuster, \$21.95, 319 pp), Mary Higgins Clark follows a serial killer who places personal ads and murders the respondents, leaving as a clue a single dancing shoe. Darcy Scott becomes involved when a good friend, Erin Kelley, becomes a victim. She and Kelley had been answering ads for another friend who was making a television documentary on personal ads. With Ms. Clark's usual flair for suspense, we follow Darcy in her investigation and the killer in his "hunt" for his next victim.

Robert Rosenberg's **Crimes of the City** (Simon and Schuster, \$18.95, 288 pp) introduces Avram Cohen, detective in the Jerusalem police. Avram has several cases to worry him this winter—mysterious bombings in various religious centers of the town and the death of two Russian Orthodox nuns in a convent just outside the town. Are all of these an attempt to stir up still more religious unrest, or are they just unconnected crimes that happen to coincide with an increase in Intifada activities? Are the facts that the nuns are mother and daughter and that the convent has a KGB "watcher" at all relevant to the bombings? An interesting character study of a policeman who is watching his city disintegrate around his ears, as much from political meddling as from terrorism, while he tries to hold a small piece of it together by doing his job.

Stuart Kaminsky's **Lieberman's Folly** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 216 pp) introduces Chicago cop Abe Lieberman ("the Rabbi") and his partner Bill Hanrahan ("Father Murphy") in a case that starts in Abe's brother's deli. A beautiful hooker, Estralda Valdez, comes in at breakfast seeking Abe's help. But Estralda is murdered despite their unofficial attempts to protect her, and Lieberman and Hanrahan feel obliged to investigate the trail to a murder and robbery that took place years before in Galveston, Texas. Interesting new characters to add to Kaminsky's already well-regarded Inspector Rostnikov and Toby Peters series.

P. C. Doherty has entered the struggle to determine whether Richard III did kill the "Little Princes" in the 1480's. In **The Fate of the Princes** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 192 pp), Doherty uses Francis, Viscount Lovell, a close friend and confidant of Richard III. Lovell, who wasn't seen again after the Battle of East Stoke in 1487, tells the tale in his dying memoirs. As usual, real persons and events are used to make Doherty's tale believable, and while Richard is not made out to be quite the hero Josephine Tey portrays in *Daughter of Time*, Lovell's story is a creditable account of what might have happened in those fateful years of Richard's doomed reign.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Although *A Kiss Before Dying* is dripping with murder, mystery, and suspense, it can't be painted as a classic whodunit. That's because we know who did it, very early on.

Not only does the audience witness the horrible death of a pretty coed, Dorothy Carlsson (Sean Young), but no effort is made to hide the identity of the killer, her boyfriend and fellow student Jonathan Corliss (Matt Dillon). When the two lovebirds find the marriage license bureau at Philadelphia's City Hall closed for lunch, they adjourn to the building's roof, which offers a panoramic view of the City of Brotherly Love. There, by way of explanation, Corliss tells his fiancée, "I'm sorry Dory. You only have yourself to blame."

Coldly, he tosses her off the roof, her body crashing through the glass ceiling below onto the

floor of the building's crowded lobby. Coldly again, he grabs the cigarettes and lighter she left on the ledge, has a smoke, and descends to the ground floor. There, he walks past her bloodied and broken body, drops a letter in the mailbox, and continues out into the street, without missing a beat, to catch a municipal bus.

This is one icy dude. And he's up to something, having made sure that the relationship with his late girlfriend was a secret to all.

"You haven't told anybody?" he questions Dorothy before "discovering" the license bureau is closed. When a suicide note arrives in the mail, and lacking any evidence of foul play, Philadelphia's finest rule the death a suicide. A little pressure from the woman's father, wealthy copper magnate Thor Carlsson (Max von Sydow), doesn't hurt, either. His

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interest is in keeping the whole thing quiet, especially after the coroner tells him his daughter was pregnant.

But not everyone necessarily believes the suicide story. Her twin sister Ellen, for one.

Cut to a couple of years later. Ellen is in New York City, working as a do-gooder at a Times Square shelter for troubled kids. Ellen (also played by Sean Young) has a life she likes and one that includes a handsome, caring boyfriend, Jay Faraday. Chillingly, and unbeknownst to her, he is the same man who brazenly killed her sister. But by this time our guy has borrowed the identity of an unfortunate fellow who picked him up hitchhiking.

As the relationship between Ellen and Jay unfolds, she begins to notice changes in him that she doesn't like, particularly after they marry. In addition, Ellen remains haunted by the unsatisfactorily explained death of her sister as well as the deaths of others who might have been able to help unravel the mystery.

James Dearden, the screenwriter who cut his thriller teeth with the nightmarish *Fatal Attraction*, admits in interviews he couldn't help but think of Hitchcock when making *A Kiss Before Dying*. Dearden told the *New York Times*, "Hitchcock is one of my favorite

directors, so it's a homage, though not a conscious one. I'm working in his medium, so I can't escape his influence."

The Hitchcock influences are apparent—and if the moviegoer still doesn't get it, writer/director Dearden has one of his characters watching *Vertigo* on her television, unaware that the man caressing her neck as she watches is a calculating killer.

Although the killer's identity is quickly revealed, the mystery of why he did it and what he will do next is enough to propel this film forward. That and Matt Dillon's portrayal of the killer with ice in his veins.

Dillon makes his transition from troubled teen star to adult actor in his role as the killer who ingratiates himself into the Carlsson family. He shows a flair for brooding here that is downright scary. But he manages to make a thoroughly despicable character interesting enough to get the audience wondering what makes him tick.

Sean Young, as the twin sisters, certainly performs passably but is not particularly outstanding.

With *Fatal Attraction* and, now, *A Kiss Before Dying* under his belt, suspense fans should look forward to the next big screen screamer from James Dearden.

THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photoginia Thompson of Alameda, go to Joy Hewitt Mann of Thomas Buice of Belleview, Florida; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, New York; Alice M. Breen of Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico; and D. J. Gillies of New York, New York.

graph contest was won by Vir-California. Honorable mentions Spencerville, Ontario, Canada; da; Perry E. Pariseau of Owosso, Texas; Lorraine Pallis of Flush-Los Angeles, California; David

Photo by Alqimantas Kezys

OPERATION "HOURLASS" by Virginia Thompson

"Are your goggles on tight, Miss Rogers?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Anderson."

"The tiniest breeze can whip fine sand up in an instant. Your eyes would be defenseless without goggles."

"My legs are so tired from climbing, sir."

"His house is just over this hill, Rogers. Remember, 'Time and tide wait for no man,' or woman."

"Yes, sir, I know. 'Time is of the essence.'"

"And, 'Time is money,' Rogers. Think what a boon this will be to the economy. Vast markets opening up. Whole new opportunities appearing for people who want to make each moment count."

"It seems sad, though, Mr. Anderson."

"He's a thief, Rogers. Remember that. Keep repeating to yourself, 'Life is short.'"

"Yes, sir."

"'Too soon old, too late smart.' I'm not as young as I once was, but I'm determined to live the rest of my life to its absolute fullest."

"But shooting him, sir?"

"You just persuade him to step out on the porch, Rogers. I'll shoot him with the tranquilizer gun. It's a painless overdose. He'll sleep forever. He deserves to."

"He's kind of a folk figure, isn't he, sir?"

"He's an impediment to a progressive world, Rogers. He should have been removed eons ago. Folk figure. 'Mr. Sandman,' indeed."

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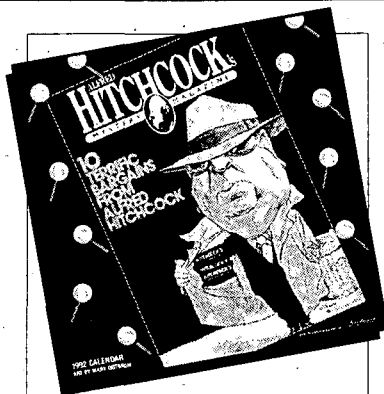
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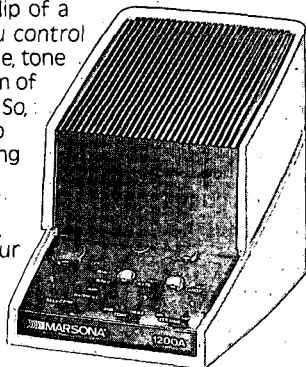
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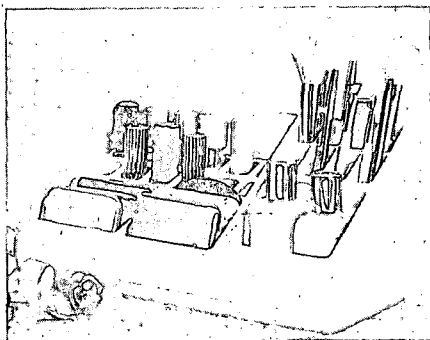
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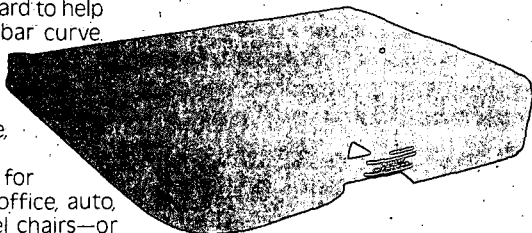
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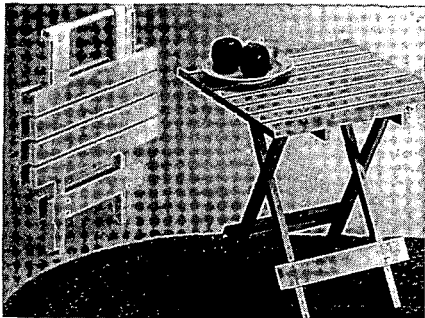
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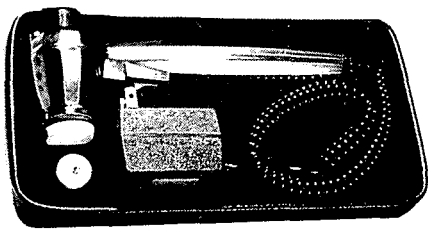
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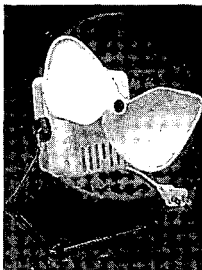
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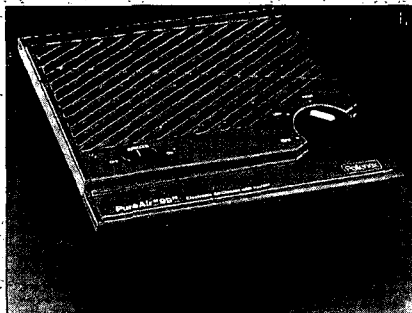
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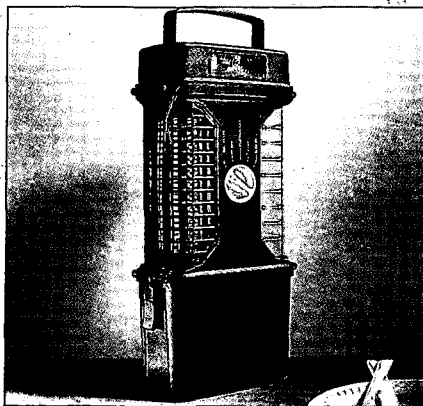
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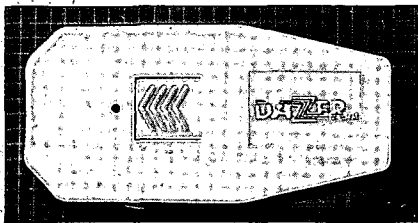
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